



The Combinatorics Project

By Thorin N. Tatge

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Six ponies. Takes two to tango.

$$\{6|2\} = 6!/(2!*((6-2)!))$$

$$= 720/(2*4!)$$

$$= 360/24$$

$$= 15$$

Fifteen pairings. Five alternate universes.

Let's get this ship sailing.

CHAPTER 1

SKY, EARTH AND BEYOND

#1: DR—Celebrity Couple

In Equestria, anything was possible.

It was possible for a young artist with the tincture of success of her soul to find big city fame, despite never having lived in the big city. And it was possible for a unicorn to make a home for herself in Cloudsdale—thanks to enchanted boots, the magic of a powerful friend, and the aid of the royal magisters guild. It was even possible for her to win respect there after having made a vain fool of herself on her first visit.

It was possible, too, to find true love in a form superficially different from oneself. To see past uncouth speech and rampant informality in order to discover a soul with surprising similarities to one's own: A passion for pushing the limits. A drive to be known, to be exceptional, to be famous. A penchant for inimitable flash and radiant beauty.

Perhaps most remarkably, it was not only possible, but downright common, for one to resemble one's love in another way: To share their sex.

The grand and ancient realm of Equestria prospered for many reasons, chief among which was the fact that its populace never wanted for natural resources, making poverty a rarity. A major reason for this was its low natural birthrate, which in turn owed to the ubiquity of homosexuality. Same-sex relations were every bit as common in Equestria as their opposite-sex counterparts, and in some places where mares composed over two thirds of the population, they were more common still.

It was therefore no surprise to Rarity, celebrity fashion designer in the clouds, that the dear friends she had left behind in Ponyville three years ago had all found love in the embrace of other mares. What did startle her somewhat was the fact that they'd decided to pair up with each other!

Enough was enough! Rarity had been away from the town she still thought of as home for far too long. She had projects coming up, yes, but there were *always* projects. First there'd been the Sapphire Shores tour, then the Fillydelphia exhibition, the Wonderbolts Pan-Equestria tour and the design and release of her Rainboom fashion line. Now there were follow-up interviews to schedule, the kerfuffle over the AirTrain patent to attend to, an upcoming series of photoshoots for *Modern Mare*—there was no end to it. Time would simply have to be carved out. Her manager and her publicist would need cajoling, as would her agent.

Still. At least there was one person in her life who would understand.

Rarity took pleasure in tapping on the window with a pebble. This was partly because the glass windows had been her own idea, an architectural feature not normally combined with clouds, and it had been so difficult to build them that she took pride in every pane. But her pleasure stemmed mainly from getting to turn about the game Rainbow liked to play with her so often. Many was the evening or lunchtime break when she'd had her work interrupted by an unmistakable cadence, a rat-a-tat-tat at the window or door that couldn't possibly be a reporter, but only her love.

That patternless pattern was present throughout their life together. The dew on the windows on a cloudy day; the athletic equipment strewn lazily across the gym; the arrangement of bottles and bars of soap in the shower. No one could leave dishes scattered all over the sink like Rainbow could. No one could leave Rarity's workshop in quite the same state of disarray. No one could make their bed quite as beautifully, quite as imperfectly, as Rainbow Dash.

That was why they drew the line where they did—why they still made their own beds and did their own washing. Skies above, all Equestria knew they could afford to hire servants or live in a posh hotel. But where would the intimacy in that be? What was the point of being a celebrity couple if they couldn't harbor secrets with which to tease the populace? What was the point of indulging the paparazzi if they couldn't later stir the pot again during their precious private hours?

So it was Rainbow herself, and not a servant, who came to the 'basement' window. She was wearing only a violet headband Rarity had given her to

match her eyes...and oh, those eyes, and their delectably irritated expression!

"What's the big idea?" asked Rainbow, her voice muffled by the glass until Rarity used her magic to swing it open. "I was doing laps in the gym."

"I've had a letter from Applejack," Rarity reported. "Did you know that she's transformed her family farm into a commune?"

Rainbow's expression grew puzzled. "That sounds kinda familiar..."

"...And that she's taken up with Fluttershy?"

Now those beautiful violet eyes became wide and round. "Really? Fluttershy and Applejack?"

Rarity drew back with a flushed smile. "So she writes! And she mentioned in passing that Pinkie Pie has moved in with Twilight, if you can believe it."

"Holy buckets! When did that happen?"

"Sometime in the last year, I gather. Darling? We really should visit. It's been far and away too long."

Now Rainbow was pained, which it pained Rarity in turn to see. "We can't! There's a Wonderbolt show in Stalliongrad next week, and we've got that whole series of photo shoots to plan, not to mention our day in patent court..."

"I know, I know," Rarity was already saying. "And Cloudsdale isn't even close to Ponyville these days. But look at it this way, dearest. We've just wrapped up the last showing of the Rainboom line. By next year, they'll expect me to have another fashion line well underway, and that means I'll need to begin in a matter of months! But right now, no one is expecting me to do any designing. It's time for a vacation! We can reschedule the meetings with Photo Finish's people, and have our lawyers speak for us in court."

"But—"

"I'm sorry, Rainbow, but this is what free time looks like these days! We have to seize it when it comes along!"

"But the show!"

Rarity winced. "Ah, right. Yes, the show. We can't exactly pull you out of the first Stalliongrad show in ages. Maybe after?"

"But there's the afterparty, and the interviews, and then on the twentieth I'm booked for the Sugar Bowl halftime show. And I've got to keep up with my training..."

Rarity shook her head in resignation. "You're right, of course. The busy life spurs you on! But would it be all right if I were to go? I miss our old haunts, Dash. The cheery voices of dear friends..."

"Sure, knock yourself out. I'll be out of town for the show anyway—no point in you going lonely. Think you can shake the paparazzi?"

Rarity chuckled and tossed her curls. "I should hope to have learned a *thing* or two from you by now. I expect I'll manage it."

"In that case, why don'tcha go tomorrow? I'll be meeting with the team, so you may as well not hang around."

Rarity smirked and leaned down through the tilted window. "Do you think it's that easy to be rid of me, Rainbow Dash?"

She could hear the beating of those wonderful wings as they raised Rainbow to her level. "No. If you were easy, you wouldn't be mine."

There wasn't time for Rarity to think before the kiss was upon her. She could only hug back.

#2: AF—Earth Mothers

The reporters had been refreshingly easy to slip past. For all they knew, Rarity was currently enjoying a nice, long bubble bath at home, and if anyone tried to spy through the tinted windows, they'd only end up waiting in consternation for her to leave the bathroom and thinking her appetite for bathing knew no bounds. This thought amused her as she strolled along the familiar road to Sweet Apple Acres. It was a beautiful day, and no one—not even those she was bound to visit—knew where she was. Privacy was a beautiful thing in those rare moments when it could be enjoyed under the sun.

It wasn't long before her first surprise: Where once had lain undeveloped meadow, there were now plentiful textured fields of many colors. Though Rarity couldn't tell what was growing there, it was clear the Apples had expanded their operations to far more than just apples.

Another few furlongs, and there was a sign—nothing more than a broad, attractive board, buried deep in the earth. SWEET SEED COMMUNE, it read. Below was a detailed map showing the regions associated with various crops, crisscrossed with lines and notations showing who was in charge of which sections, according to a rotating schedule. Rarity noticed a green region marked "Animal Preserve" on the northwest edge of the property, not too far from the farmhouse.

It wasn't long before she came to the first workers. Their crop appeared to be yellow squash, but their own nature was harder to discern. They were a green mare and a mango-orange stallion, both wearing elaborate wide-brimmed hats that would have amazed the clothing designer if they hadn't clashed so violently with their surroundings.

"Good morning!" greeted Rarity. She was used to being polite unless aggrieved, and the idea of startling these random farmers with the presence of a celebrity, should they happen to recognize her, amused her.

The two rose and removed their hats, lifting their heads merrily. "Good morning!" they said in turn. Rarity could quite put names to their vaguely familiar faces, but what surprised her more was that the female worker was

a unicorn—distinctly uncommon in the farming class, especially in Ponyville.

Rarity smiled. "Might either of you know where I could find Miss Applejack, the proprietor?"

"Didja see a sign on the way here?" asked the green unicorn in a surprisingly downhomey voice. "Should have the full schedule."

"Oh, of course. I should have checked it when I passed it. How silly of me."

"Not at all!" said the equally cheerful earth pony. "Or you could ask Miss Fluttershy over there." He pointed to a slowly sinking speck of graceful yellow near the horizon. "She'd know, I expect!"

Rarity let out a dry chortle. "Yes, she would, wouldn't she? Thank you very much." As she passed the two workers by, they scooped up their gaudy hats and were back to their tasks with admirable speed.

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Rarity hurried toward the yellow speck, peripherally taking in the sight of new crops, along with a few small buildings she didn't recognize dotting the fields here and there. Dwellings, she supposed? There were other ponies at work as well, but Rarity honed in on what did in fact turn out to be Fluttershy, wiggling about at the orchard's edge with her head under a fallen apple tree.

"Darling!! What on earth has you so captivated under there?"

Fluttershy froze, her wings rigid and half extended. She slowly pulled her forebody free and looked up in amazement. "Rarity?"

"In the flesh! Surprised to see me?"

The yellow pegasus pony's cheeks flushed pinker than her mane. "I'm so glad you're here! Oh, Rarity, I've missed you so much. Have you moved back to town?"

Rarity gave her head a reluctant shake. "I'm only here for the day. But I simply couldn't stay away when I learned what Applejack had done with this place! But then again...it wasn't just her, was it?"

Slowly, Fluttershy brought her delighted blush under control. "It's amazing how many ponies have decided to join us out here. We had no idea the commune would grow so quickly! We just wanted to share a little piece of our happiness."

Things were beginning to come clear. "So the relationship came first, and the commune came after?"

"That's right," Fluttershy agreed. "Once we'd both found what we wanted, it seemed like it would be selfish to keep it to ourselves."

Rarity looked around, eventually spotting the original Apple family farmhouse. "Is Applejack in today?"

"Oh, she's in the field. I think she's breaking ground for the string bean crop. We're starting to grow so many new things, Rarity! It's so exciting!" With this, Fluttershy lifted her face to the sky and hovered in exultation.

Rarity found numerous questions occurring to her. But they could wait. She wanted to speak to her friends together—to see their newfound happiness firsthand. "Darling? Would you be willing to show me to the beanfield?"

"Oh, yes! Just give me a minute." Fluttershy dropped silently to the earth and resumed digging under the tree trunk before her.

"What are you doing under there, if I may ask?"

As the pegasus gave one final tug, a length of wild tree root came flying out, spraying dirt everywhere. Rarity gasped, shaking it from her coat and mane as well as she could.

"Oh! I'm sorry, Rarity. But this tree just happened to fall right over a prairie dog burrow, and the poor things were getting tangled in its roots trying to dig their way out." Sure enough, a gaggle of prairie dogs emerged from the

newly cleared hole, rushing for cleaner pastures. A couple of them paused to give affectionate facerubs to Fluttershy's leg.

Rarity laughed, ignoring the dirt as well as she could. "It's grand to see you haven't given up on animals entirely! I was beginning to worry you'd transferred all your affections to plants!"

"Oh, no," said the yellow pony, leading her friend toward the string bean field. "I've still got all my original affections. I just have so much more, these days."

Rarity slyly observed her companion's secret smile as they walked.

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Hats were everywhere, bobbing on the heads of workers. Straw hats, burlap hats, ridged paper...practically no two in the same shape or style! Apparently they were a rule, spoken or unspoken, of the commune. Yet there was only one Stetson, and it thankfully confirmed the identity of the well-toned carrot orange earth pony beneath it.

"Why, if it ain't Rarity! Where've you been, sugarcube?"

It was so reassuring to hear that familiar greeting. "You mean you don't already *know* my every movement?" asked Rarity, feigning amazement.

"Huh? Why would I?" asked Applejack. "Oh, you mean on account o' tabloids and such? Naw, we don't have much time for pleasure readin' around here."

"Thank you for meeting the joke halfway," Rarity teased, offering a nuzzle that Applejack happily accepted. "It's quite all right, believe me. Being trailed everywhere by reporters and photographers gets *quite* tiresome. You needn't worry, though—I've given them the slip."

"Good fer you!" replied the farmer. "So, you've come to see what we've done with the place?"

"More or less! I must admit, I was surprised by the sign. 'Sweet Seed Commune'?"

There was a subtle sigh as Applejack unhooked herself from her harness.
"It's true. Sweet Apple Acres is no more."

"Oh, but it's so much more!" interrupted Fluttershy.

"Heh heh. That it is." Applejack took a moment to duck her nose under Fluttershy's mane, evoking an almost inaudible squeal.

"I've only got a few hours," said Rarity, hiding her reaction, "but I'm dying to hear how this commune came to be!"

"Well, come on up to the house an' we'll fix ya somethin'," suggested Applejack. "How do y'feel about...Waldorf salads?"

"Waldorf? Oh my! Are you sure, Applejack? That's only around 25% apple! I remember the days when anything under 50% on this farmstead would be a scandal!"

"Well, times change," quipped the orange pony. "Come on in and make yourself comfy."

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Granny Smith was cordial to Rarity as she entered the redecorated home, though Rarity got the impression that the ailing matron didn't quite remember who she was. Just how long had it been since she'd been a guest here? She couldn't recall.

Moving past her into the kitchen, Rarity admired the newly painted upper walls. "Oh, I love the butterfly motif!"

"Of course you would notice that," said Fluttershy. "You've always been so observant."

"Well, and yet!" Rarity took a seat at the table. "Somehow I seem to have missed the signs between the two of you!"

Applejack chuckled, setting her hat on a rack sporting half a dozen different pieces of headgear. "Well, I think it took us a piece by surprise, too. Danged if ah don't owe it all to worms."

"Worms?" That was not what Rarity had expected.

"That's right," Fluttershy confirmed. "Applejack had a worm infestation last year, and it was ruining her harvest. She tried everything."

"Ah was at mah wits' end," said Applejack. "Last thing ah could think of was bringin' in Fluttershy here. She's always been a wiz with animals, after all...and worms are animals, even if they are squirmy little ones."

"I'd never really thought much about worms," revealed Fluttershy. "But once I started looking at the tunnels they made in the apples here, I was *fascinated*. I wanted to spend all my time here!"

"The worms brought us together," continued Applejack. "Ah saw how tender she was with 'em...and when she managed to draw 'em all to one grove, and saved mah crop...well, I suppose ah was just plain won over!"

"We went on a vacation to celebrate," said Fluttershy. "Have you ever been to Watershine Glade, Rarity? It's *heavenly*."

"I can't say I have," said Rarity softly, "but I've seen pictures. "The waterfalls looked endless."

"Oh, they were," Fluttershy whispered. She fell into a hush as her mate started making the salad.

"Well, I'll just say this for waterfalls," contributed Applejack. "They're good at makin' you scrabble fer places to huddle. An' while we were there, we did a whole lotta huddlin'."

"Oh, yes," confirmed Fluttershy. "AJ is a very nice huddler."

"And so there you were!" surmised Rarity.

"There we were!" continued Fluttershy. "And I decided I'd simply have to move in here. Which of course meant that my animals—at least the most tender, vulnerable ones—would have to move, too."

"So we carved out a space over yonder," said Applejack, whipping up a dressing with a front hoof while pointing with a rear one. "An' she still spends a mod'rate amount o' time with her critters. But ah was surprised how quickly she took to plants!"

"It's true! I knew that I couldn't be truly happy on a farm with only one kind of crop, any more than I could be happy caring for just one kind of animal. So...I suggested that we diversify."

"And you went along with it, Applejack?"

The earth pony finished the dressing and mixed in cups of raisins, walnuts and celery. The apple slices came last. "Oh, I wasn't too happy about cuttin' back the orchards. Those trees mean a lot to me, ya know."

Rarity nodded as Fluttershy said, "Oh, I know."

"But it had to be done," Applejack continued. "So we culled back the least fruitful apple trees, and added zucchini, an' then potatoes...corn...grapes..."

"Soon," said Fluttershy merrily, "I could walk in a straight line and come across apples, carrots, celery stalks..."

"Colorful flowers too," added Applejack.

"Oh yes, very colorful flowers. You were so good to me!"

"Well, you were no slouch, yerself! But even so, it was clear we weren't gonna be able to handle so many different crops on our own." Applejack spooned a healthy serving of salad into Rarity's bowl. "Warn't no choice but t'invite folks in!"

"And thus Sweet Seed Commune was born?" summarized Rarity.

"That's how it happened," said Fluttershy. "And now there are so many wonderful diverse things around us! Plants...animals...ponies..."

"Hats," added Applejack. "Kinda became a tradition."

"So I see!" said Rarity. She took a bite, finding the Waldorf salad deliciously zesty.

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The three of them strolled later through the still sizable apple orchard, the trees adorned by beautiful white spring blossoms.

"So how's life with mah old nemesis?" asked Applejack, cracking a mischievous grin.

"It's quite a thrill, I assure you. Our schedules are packed! And while we each might be famous on our own, we're doubly so as a unit."

"You can't tell me that doesn't please ya."

"Well, one doesn't butter one's bread with fame," ruminated Rarity, glancing at the blossoms overhead. "Even though one might wish to."

"An' they call you two 'Rarebow' these days, don't they? What kind of a name is that?"

"A rather embarrassing one, I admit. Still, it shows that the public cares!"

Fluttershy, who was enjoying the surrounding scents and sounds, spoke up softly. "It's good to be cared for."

"True enough," said Rarity. "And I'm sure the other members of your commune hold you both in high esteem."

"Yes," said Fluttershy, "but they aren't the ones who matter most." She locked eyes with her lover.

Applejack paused beneath a low-hanging branch. "Ah take a whiff of my girl," she mused, "and it's like I'm inhalin' the true essence at the core o' life."

"Why Applejack, you must really be infatuated!" exclaimed Rarity. "I've never known you to wax poetic."

This confused the farmer. "Wax? Rarity, all mah apples are wax free, guaranteed. Always have been."

The unicorn laughed and found Fluttershy laughing with her. "Oh, Applejack," said Fluttershy, her yellow coat practically glowing in the bright sun. "I think she means your words have a sheen to them that they never had before." She put her head up against her paramour and faced Rarity. "And it's true! There's so much beauty on the *inside* of this mare we hardly ever get to see!" They exchanged a fond look. "But I intend to free it."

Applejack let out a nervous laugh, not breaking eye contact. Her lover's yellow nose caressed the underside of her orange chin, easing that laughter into a happy sigh. Together, they gazed at the trees.

Rarity waited some moments before speaking. "It's been a lovely visit," she whispered. "But I think it's time for me to head on to the library. I'm hoping to be home before dark."

Fluttershy gave the fashionista an all-encompassing hug. "Don't be a stranger!"

"I'll endeavor not to be. And of course, I wish you two the very best." Rarity smiled at Applejack. "Good luck with the commune!"

"Don't need luck," said Applejack with a glance. "All ah need is my trees, and mah beautiful muse." She turned her eyes back to Fluttershy, who was on the verge of floating with joy.

"I'll be seeing you," whispered Rarity as she slipped quietly away. When she looked back from the trail leading to town, the two commune farmers were still admiring the apple blossoms together.

#3: *PT—Seekers of Arcane Knowledge*

How the Ponyville library had changed! Rarity paused to compose a sketch as she gazed from the road at the mind-boggling structure. Built into a tree, the building had always featured numerous wings—rooms upon haphazard rooms without much structure beyond multiplicity and chaos. But now it was supplemented with chambers, cupolas, promontories...it had the air of a temple of the occult. Most notable was the large chamber in the heart of the foliage built out of smooth light purple wood, with a constantly turning panel in its center. On one side was painted a huge, stylized question mark; the other featured a glimmering pyramid made from pink and silver blocks, a single blue balloon at its heart and a gleaming star of magic emerging from its apex.

The familiar sign before the library still bore the icon of a book, but now its pages shone with light and were printed with tiny pink script. When Rarity looked closely, she found that the script consisted of tiny, wiggly question marks and exclamation points. She wanted to chuckle, but her sense of wonder was even greater. With some trepidation, she strode into the library.

There were other patrons perusing the collection, which was even larger than it had been, but it was Spike who greeted Rarity from the central desk. "Rarity! You're back!!" The dragon dashed around the desk to give her a hug; rather than force him to squeeze her legs, she bowed and let him throw his stubby arms around her neck. "I can't believe you're back! I missed you so much!"

Rarity was touched by the young dragon's affection. "Yes, Spike, I'm back. It's been too long."

The purple reptile closed his eyes and squeezed harder. "You can say *that* again! All those days without you!"

This was going a bit far. Suddenly remembering his crush of yesteryear, Rarity drew gently away from Spike's embrace and tried to strike a merciful tone. "I'm glad to see you again too, Spike...but surely you know I'm with Dash now."

His face fell, as did his spines. "Oh yeah." He seemed to be trying to think of something else to say.

Rarity spared him the pain. "I'm sorry, dear. I know you were fond of me." She offered him a nuzzle, which he accepted on his belly. "If it hadn't been for the accident of our respective ages...and species...well, who knows!" She smiled at him, and he beamed with an overwhelmed sigh.

"Who knows," he gushed. "Yeah, it's too bad we'll never end up together." He shook his head and abruptly started to stare into the distance. Rarity hoped he wasn't thinking of the relatively long lifespans of dragons and unicorns compared to pegasi—that would be entirely too morbid.

"In any case, I'm only here for the afternoon," said Rarity. "I was hoping to visit with Twilight...and, ah...with Pinkie." The idea of them as a couple still unsettled her—she wasn't sure if it was because such a pairing felt wrong, or because she was frightened of what it would entail. "Are they in?"

Spike's mind resettled in the present. "Yeah, they're upstairs. Uh..." He glanced up the spiral staircase, a little nervously. "You may want to knock first."

"Right." Rarity's trepidation returned as she followed his gaze. "Well...no time like the present!" She swallowed the lump in her throat and ascended. Spike remained before the desk, watching her from below. Well, let him. This was something of a significant reunion.

Sure enough, set directly in the middle of the junction of causeways leading to various wings of the tree sat an enclosed room bearing a sparkling question mark on its door. Based on the lavender paint job, it was probably the very chamber Rarity had seen from the outside—the nervous system of the Ponyville Library, so to speak. Certainly it made *Rarity* nervous. She knocked a hoof delicately three times against the door....

Where there had before been silence, now stifled laughter was audible from the thickly walled room. Rarity stepped back, embarrassed. She wondered whether she'd had the misfortune to catch her old friends in something...improper.

With a click, the door swung open more easily than she'd thought it could, and Pinkie's face was right in hers, looking young as ever, if not younger. Her blue eyes instantly went wide and her muzzle parted in a gasp. In the second before Pinkie could speak, Rarity noticed that a billowing green-yellow gas was escaping from the doorway above her, and it smelled...not nearly as bad as she would have guessed. Almost stimulating.

"RARITY!!! Sparky, look! It's the rare part of Rarebow! And she *is* rare, too,' cause there's only *one* of her and she hasn't been here in ages!!" Rarity was getting ready to respond, but before she could, the pink mare leapt upon her and hugged tight. Rarity stumbled back, letting out a squeal. She collapsed onto the wooden floor, and while she couldn't disentangle herself enough to return the hug, she did manage a weak nuzzle.

"Pinkie, please!"

"Oh, sorry! I was just so *happy* to see you! How have you been, Rarity? How are the paparazzi treating you? Is it true that you and Rainbow are gonna do a photoshoot together? An *erotic* photo shoot? Because that's what I heard! And is it true that 'erotic' means 'in an environment lacking oxygen'? Because that sounds like you'd have to hold your breaths a long time!!"

"Pinkie—"

"But we might be able to help! We've been working on that kind of thing, haven't we, Sparks?"

"Yes...yes, we have." Twilight was there at the door now, and despite Pinkie blocking most of her vision, Rarity noticed something different about the academic. A streak of sparkling silver in her mane?

"Twilight, it's so good to see you," Rarity croaked. "Do you think you could...manage to call your...lover off?"

Pinkie stood back and gasped, not realizing how aggressive she'd been. Rarity stumbled to her feet and shook her mane into place. The green and yellow gas was beginning to get heady.

"I wasn't expecting you, Rarity!" said Twilight, hurrying to shut off a Bunsen burner. "Did you send a note? Or maybe let the mayor know you were coming?"

"On the contrary, I thought I might give you a pleasant surprise!" Rarity coughed, finding the cloying gas too much for her. "But instead, I find *myself* surpr...what is this strange miasma?!"

"Oh, that's just balloon gas," said Pinkie. "Watch!" She stood firm in the hallway and sucked up a lungful of the stuff from the upper air. To Rarity's amazement, the earth pony's coat acquired a tinge of green, her body expanded, her eyes bulged, and her tail started to float! Soon, Pinkie was thrice her former girth, and her skin was beginning to become translucent. Rarity was afraid to look beneath the surface, but thought she could make out organs being pressed against the edges of Pinkie's equine anatomy. She seemed lighter as well, and thoroughly bulbous. Eventually, she let out her breath and the entire effect went racing out of her in a stream of gas, yellow, green and pink, and Pinkie was her extraordinary self again.

"But—incredible!!" exclaimed Rarity. "That was—that was absolutely *revolting*, Pinkie! And yet...fascinating! Surely it was magic!"

"Thaaaaaat's right! Sort of. Kind of! More or less!"

"Magically enhanced chemistry," explained Twilight. The billows were finally dissipating, but Rarity could now see that this 'balloon gas' had filled practically the whole room.

"I see," she murmured. "Twilight—Pinkie—what in the world were you two *doing* in there?!"

"Juuuust having a little fun!" chimed Pinkie, striking a playful stance.

"Well," said Twilight, "that *and* trying to develop a way to float using our stomachs as bladders. Now that we've worked out how to use our large intestines as long-term storage, that is."

Rarity felt unease rising in her own stomach. "You've...what?! But that sounds simply disgusting!"

"Disgusting and *fun!!*" shouted the pink pony, doing a backflip that shuddered the floor.

Twilight grinned bashfully. "I prefer to think of it as...arcane study."

"Misusing your stomachs?" replied a stunned Rarity. "Bucking the natural order? You know there isn't a reliable flight spell for a *reason*, Twilight! Only pegasus ponies are meant to fly!"

"Yyyep!" agreed Pinkie Pie. "Along with birds, bats, insects, griffons, specks of dust, parasprites, flying pigs, dragons, alicorns, harpies, hippogriffs, microorganisms, pterosaurs, winged salamanders, gorgons, anyone with a hot air balloon or a pedal-powered dirigible, and now US!"

"Does Princess Celestia know about this?"

"Actually," said Twilight, "Celestia pulled the strings to get us our latest grant. She's as interested in arcane studies as anyone. It's very *avant garde!*"

"...Aaaaand romantic!" added Pinkie, striking an ominous bipedal stance. "We're unlocking doors that we were never even meant to *discover!* Seeking out knowledge that **PONIES WERE NOT MEANT TO KNOW!!**" She waved her forehooves about in a flurry.

"And that's...romantic?" echoed Rarity.

"Oh, very!" said a blushing Twilight. Rarity could now see that her coat and mane were definitely flecked with sparkling silver. "Pinkie's helped me figure out so many things I never would have thought to try on my own! Who would have thought that properly tempered sauerkraut would let you *inhale and exhale at the same time??*"

"That's how it's always worked for me!" said a shrugging Pinkie.

"So now," continued Twilight, "we're working on a technique for long-term breath holding that *anyone* can use! Without magic!"

"Except for the inherent magic of sauerkraut!" added Pinkie. "Maybe that'll help you with your erotic photoshoot."

"I think the word you're thinking of is 'anaerobic'," Twilight suggested.

"What? EWWW! No!"

Rarity grimaced, wondering what Pinkie thought that meant. "The rumors concerning that particular project are rather exaggerated, I'm afraid. Although I confess you have given me a new idea or two. But this research! I would never have thought it in your line, Twilight!"

"Why not? I've always been a scientist at heart."

"But you wrote papers! This is so...physical!"

"Oh, Sparks loves to get physical, dontcha?" Pinkie gyrated a hip against her lover's flank. "She just needs a little inspiration now and then." With that, Pinkie blew a raspberry with her tongue—except that a swirl of glitter and confetti came out.

"How did you—"

"Sparkle sack," explained Pinkie. "Sits right next to the saliva gland! And you refill it by eating construction paper!"

Twilight stood enthusiastically beside her lover, their coats brushing as they both faced Rarity. "In any case, I've never had a problem with being physical," she explained. "I've always been interested in applied research! It's intimacy that I have issues with."

"But not with mee-eee!" crooned Pinkie, kicking up to stand on her forehooves.

"Pinkie has...a certain way of taking the pressure off," whispered Twilight.

Rarity only stared, taking it all in. "Might I ask how your relationship began?"

"Oh, sure," said Pinkie. "Sparks had juuust got to town, and I walked up and gave her time for some framing dialogue with Spike, and then she said 'Hello!' and I leapt in the air and *gaaaasped* because she was new and I—"

"No, no! Not the first time you met! Your *relationship*!"

"Isn't that the beginning of a relationship?" asked Twilight. "When you first meet?"

"I *mean* your personal connection!" pressed Rarity. "When—how—when did you fall in *love*?"

The two of them exchanged glances, blinking and pondering. "Huh. Do you remember, Pinkie?"

"I think maybe it was after the scent cannon, but before the sauerkraut."

"That late? I'd be more likely to place it a little bit after you started coming over in the evenings and interfering with my research."

"Interfering?! I was helping!"

"You were making elaborate sculptures out of books, reading over my shoulder, and singing about nothing in particular."

"But you have to admit, it gave you new focus!"

Twilight smirked. "Yes...after a while, I suppose it did." She turned to Rarity. "I started using her as a test subject, instead of Spike."

"You should see me with a mustache!" chirped Pinkie.

"And she gave a lot more suggestions than Spike ever did. Some of them...maybe one out of a hundred...were actually good!"

"You put out enough volume," exclaimed Pinkie, "and you're sure to strike a few gold nuggets!"

Rarity nodded with a sigh. "I think I can piece it together from there. But what about the bakery, Pinkie? Don't they miss you?"

"Eh, the Cakes got by without me before, and they're doing fine now. I mean, it's not like I've given up sweets!" She demonstrated her point by planting her face into Twilight's withers and inhaling at length.

"And I teach lessons on Fridays," explained Twilight, doing her best to ignore Pinkie. "One class for all ages and one for adults. But we've got to keep researching if we're going to have anything to teach!"

Rarity tried to picture it. "Please tell me Sweetie Belle isn't—"

"The best sparkle spewer in her claa-aass!" singsonged Pinkie.

"Good grief. Well, I suppose that so long as the princess knows...this isn't *too* much of a crime against nature and civilization."

"Research isn't a crime!" insisted Twilight.

"You gotta keep pushing those borders!" chimed Pinkie.

"Indeed. But...balloon gas? Really?"

Twilight glanced at the beaker that still stood half full on the burner. "It does have other uses," she allowed.

"The way I see it," explained Pinkie, "anything that can make ponies more like latex is aaaallll good!"

"Yes. Well." Rarity backed away from the mysterious room, whose contents she was just as glad not to encounter. "It was a delight seeing you both again."

"Awww, you mean you have to go *already*?!" exclaimed Pinkie. "But we haven't even played any games yet!"

"And we've got so many prototypes you could help us test!" added Twilight.

"Yes, well. It is getting dark, after all, and I mustn't put my professional stalkers out of a job! Duty calls, as duty always must."

Twilight looked accepting, if disappointed, and Pinkie sighed deeply. "Well, when you see Rainbow, give her a kiss for me. Make it a big kiss, like this!" She proceeded to demonstrate by giving Twilight a long, intense smooch, her legs tangled up around her neck.

"I'll do my best," promised Rarity. Best wishes to you...and keep up the good work."

"You too!" called Twilight, her voice muffled. She managed to give Rarity a wink before Pinkie's advances covered her face entirely. Now just what was that supposed to mean?

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Somewhat shaken, Rarity stopped on her way out to speak again with Spike. "Well...that was interesting, to say the least."

"How'd you like the balloon gas?" he asked.

"I was...unprepared. For all of it. Spike, how did all this happen?"

He shrugged and shelved a book. "Chemistry, I guess. Something I wouldn't know anything about."

Rarity felt sympathetic to her admirer's position, perhaps more than ever before. "Tell me...how has it been for you, Spike? So much change...I can only imagine it's been terribly hard on you."

"Eyyaaah. It's not as bad as when Twilight was in her mold culture phase." He stuck out his tongue. "Honestly, I'll get by. Sure, maybe Pinkie does sometimes use half-eaten lollipops as bookmarks...and maybe the weird moans and giggles can get a little annoying. But hey! At least they keep each other busy."

"So they do," admitted Rarity. "And thank Celestia for that!"

She and the dragon shared a brief laugh before she went on her way. It was true, Rarity reflected as she donned her winged boots and let them carry her heavenward. Everypony needs someone to keep them busy. And a busy life was nothing to be ashamed of.

CHAPTER 2

NOISE AND SILENCE

or

SUGAR AND SPICE

#4: FT—The Quiet Life

My Faithful Student, Twilight Sparkle:

I hope that you know I would never seek to denigrate the peace of mind and holy bliss your marriage has brought you. Everything I said at your ceremony still resonates firmly in my heart. The Lady Fluttershy completes you, just as you complete her, and nopony should ever be denied the most perfect wholeness of being they can attain.

That said, I confess I have been concerned about the quality of your latest missives. Since returning from your honeymoon two months ago, my dear Twilight, you have sent only four letters concerning the nature of friendship, and of these, none appear to have required you to do so much as leave your home. While there are certainly endless insights to be fathomed on the subject of a harmonious marriage, I fear that your particular union may be too staid to give you a comprehensive view. I do not, for instance, need to hear the details of your system for allocating bed space, and while it pleases me that you have taken an interest in guessing what kind of tea your new wife might like to drink each morning, I imagine you might have spared me the complete log of your success/failure record.

Have you forgotten that you have other friends? Marriage is by no means an end to the friendship phase of one's life, Twilight Sparkle. One still must remain connected to the outside world, and what better way to do this than through the well-worn goodwill of one's oldest friends? I would like you to draw your next few letters from the experiences of others besides yourself and your wife, my dearest pupil. And in the meantime, you may wish to consider ways in which your marriage might be made more...exciting.

*With an enduring affection,
Your mentor,
Princess Celestia.*

Twilight frowned as she set down the letter. She looked over to the corner where her wife was, with help from her bunny, tending to an injured tortoise.

"Angel?" she called.

Both bunny and pegasus looked over.

"Ugh," said Twilight. "We have got to get this worked out. My wife can't have the same pet name as her actual pet does!"

"So you meant me, Twilight?" asked Fluttershy humbly.

"Yes, I did! Hmm." The letter forgotten, Twilight climbed to her feet from her homemade beanbag chair. "Angel bunny, would you mind if we gave you a new name? Something like...Fred?"

The bunny adopted a tense stance and shook his head.

"Not Fred? Well, what about...Pip? That's a good rabbit name, isn't it?"

The head shaking became more emphatic.

"No? Roger?"

Now the bunny was staring downright aggressively at Twilight.

"To be fair," offered Fluttershy, "he did have the name first."

Twilight sighed. "How about Devil Bunny? Look. To me, Fluttershy *is* an angel. She's the sweetest, gentlest angel I could ever hope to meet. I've *tried* coming up with another pet name for her, but there's just nothing half as good! I've been through every thesaurus in the library!"

Fluttershy sighed a far more ethereal sigh as she settled next to her lapine helper. "Don't worry, Angel. No one's going to make you change your name. You'll always be *my* little angel."

Twilight watched with a pang of jealousy as the rabbit snuggled up to the pegasus with a level of affection he'd never yet shown Twilight. "But then what do I call *you*?" she asked her spouse helplessly. "I *need* a pet name for you! The literature agrees—I can't just keep calling you Fluttershy all the time."

"Oh, that's all right," said Fluttershy. "You can just call me Angel Two."

"What? As in, the *number* two?"

"That's right. He was the first Angel in the household, and now I'm the second."

"But Ang—Fluttershy, you're my wife! I am *not* calling you number two when you're *first* in my heart!"

"That's...well, that's very sweet of you, Twilight, but then I don't know what we can do. This is a real quandary." She brightened up. "Do you think we could write to the princess for a solution?"

"Gaaahh!!" erupted Twilight, provoking the hurt tortoise to crane its neck in surprise. "Celestia was right! We *are* homebodies! We need to stop poring over every little thing and get out of the house more."

Fluttershy was sitting beside the tortoise now, trying to calm it down. "Celestia said that?"

"She implied it. She wants me to write about our friends for a change, and not us. I think she's tired of hearing about our little marital triumphs and squabbles."

"Oh." The yellow pegasus flushed with embarrassment. "Twilight, do you know if Princess Celestia was ever married?"

"A few times, I think. Why?"

"I wonder if she already knows everything about marriage there is to know."

"Doubtful," Twilight replied. "Being immortal and the ruler of the sun, she could never have an ordinary marriage. It can't have been the same for her as for everyone else."

Fluttershy's tone was very meek now. "I feel like it probably isn't the same for anypony, Twilight."

But Twilight was rolling up the letter to stash it away. "Aren't Rarity and Pinkie having a masquerade tomorrow night?"

"I...I think so. But they know we aren't coming. They have a masquerade every month, so they won't be offended if—"

"That's it, then! We'll go to that. There's sure to be something there I can write a friendship lesson about, and maybe we'll pick up some tips for spicing up our home life."

Fluttershy was visibly nervous now. "Spicing...up?"

"That's right! I mean, how do we spend our time, Angel? Uh, Angel Two? Fluttershy? What do we do all the time when I'm not away at the library? You tend to your animals, and I read books! Sometimes you make a nice quiet supper for me, and I make you nice quiet breakfasts in the morning. We have a nice quiet garden on the roof and a variety of nice quiet hobbies. You replaced the shuttle on your loom so it wouldn't make so much noise against the harness! Let's face it, Fluttershy. Our lives together are hopelessly, utterly *tranquil*!"

"But...But Twilight..."

"Yes?"

"I, uh...I like it this way."

Twilight's face turned briefly crimson, but her anger faded. "Well, that's the problem," she conceded. "So do I. But don't you see, Fluttershy? Our lives are slipping away. With each quiet day that goes by without anything

changing...we're one day closer to the grave, and with nothing to show for it!"

Fluttershy only returned a mournful look.

"No, we're going to that masquerade, and that's that. At the very least, it's a start."

"But...but what will we dress as?"

This was a problem. "I don't know. Normally I'd ask Rarity for help, but...since she's hosting, it doesn't seem quite proper. The only other time I went to one of these, I just put a bag over my head with holes in it, but that didn't seem to go over so well. I guess the idea is that you cover your whole body, not just your face, so that your coat color doesn't give you away."

"Maybe I should put my new extra-quiet loom to good use," the pegasus suggested.

"Yes! Yes, a woven costume would be perfect. And I should read up on the subject. I don't think I have anything in my private collection about masquerades..." Twilight quickly tore through her twelve-shelf library, leaving the books scattered on and around the sofa in a matter of seconds. "Nope! I guess I'll head on over to the library, then!"

"But it's...it's your day off!"

"I never took a day off when I lived there! At least, not a *scheduled* one. Besides, Spike is always glad to see me."

"Well, that's true," Fluttershy acknowledged. "All right, Twilight. We can go to the masquerade together. But let's...not get our hopes up. Okay?"

"Not get our hopes up? But Angel!" The bunny glared at her. "Uh, Fluttershy, my hopes have *always* been up. You knew that when you married me!"

Fluttershy lowered her head bashfully. "That's true. And I love you for it."

"Don't worry, we'll find the perfect way to spice up our lives. I'm sure of it. See you later!"

With that, Twilight pulled on her saddlebags and trotted out the door, and Fluttershy surveyed the pile of disheveled books she'd left in her wake.

"I guess it's time to invite everyone in for clean-up," she told Angel. "You can take care of the tortoise while I go and fetch a few helpers." With that, she slipped out the window, singing alluringly in some animal language about the joys of sorting and filing, leaving Angel alone to stew in his juices as he took the tortoise's temperature.

#5: AD—Rough and Tumble

"Twilight!" called Spike from the next room as the library's entrance bell rang. At least, it was Spike's voice. But Twilight was having a hard time reconciling that with the monstrous dark form rushing toward her. She backed away, capsizing a table. "What? Who?"

The fearsome and rather deformed visage, made from what now appeared to be paint, cardboard, and feathers, fell aside, revealing Spike's familiar face behind it. "What's wrong? I just wanted to give you a hug."

Twilight laughed nervously, picking up the table with her magic while trying to hide her embarrassment. "Oh, it's you, Spike! I thought for a moment you were an owlbear."

The diminutive dragon grabbed up his mask in excitement. "Really?! An owlbear, huh? So my costume is that good?"

He turned to admire himself from various angles. Now back in command of her senses, Twilight could see that the brownish black outfit covering her erstwhile assistant was ill tailored, giving it a bulky, deformed appearance. Feathers of various colors were glued to the shoulders and chest as well as the face, and what she had taken for claws were really jaggedly cut popsicle sticks. Oddly, his lack of skill in assembling the outfit seemed to have made it more terrifying, if only for an instant.

"It's...impressive, Spike. I take it you're going to tomorrow night's masquerade?"

"Of course! I've been going every month! They just keep getting bigger and better!"

Twilight tilted her head somewhat. "Do...you fool anyone? About who you are?"

The dragon became slightly downcast. "Not yet. I'm the only one in town with a build like this, you know." He pumped a meager bicep for elucidation. "But it's still plenty of fun, and I think my costumes are getting better." He lowered his voice. "Rarity gave me some tips last time."

"Did she." So his previous attempts had been worse?

"Yeah! She taught me a couple basic stitches, and how to hide your mistakes, er, I mean, your seams, with decorations like feathers...plus I've been getting better at using my flame to fuse bits of cloth together. Here, I'll show you!" He raced for a trove of scrap materials stored in a book cubby.

"But...doesn't cloth burn?"

"Not if you breathe on it right! Watch!" The young dragon held two pieces of satin at arm's length, suffused them with a misty green exhalation, and showed the fused green and pink product to Twilight. She seemed to recall once seeing a similar effect when Pinkie Pie had spit out two pieces of bubble gum she'd been chewing simultaneously.

"That's great, Spike! I'm proud of you. It's always good to learn new skills."

Spike returned the fused cloth to his cubby. "I bet Fluttershy could make a really nice costume, especially with your help." He scratched at an earflap. "Say...I don't remember ever *seeing* Fluttershy at the masquerades. Or you, either, except for that one time. With the bag?"

Twilight flushed in embarrassment. "Well, you know Fluttershy. She prefers to stay in."

"But I thought she loves the great outdoors!" said Spike.

"Well, she also prefers to stay out! Out *and* in."

"Isn't that...everywhere?"

"Everywhere except for loud events, like masquerades. But don't worry, Spike! I'm going this month, and I'm determined to get Fluttershy to come with me. And that's why I'm here—to figure out a costume!"

"Uh...but it's *tomorrow*," objected Spike. "Isn't that a little last minute?"

"I've always been a talented procrastinator, Spike, and the other side of that coin is that I'm good at rushing to meet deadlines! Now, where is that Guide to Costume Balls and Other Themed Soirées?"

As Twilight was levitating books off the shelves seemingly at random, the door swung open with a thump. In strode Applejack, panniers loaded with yarn and a variety of random objects. "Did I hear somepony say they're aimin' to make a costume?"

Twilight looked down from the second level, half a dozen books in mid-air. "Aheh, yep," she admitted. "Wait. What have you got there? Yarn?"

"Among other things," deadpanned the farmer. "Twilight, yer not the only one who's a mite behind schedule. I got just one day to rustle up a costume fit to beat Rainbow's, an' I figured if I could find a decent book o' patterns, I could have my ol' granny whip me up somethin'...unless you've got a better idea."

Spike was in place behind the desk. "I think we do have some books of patterns! But what kind of patterns do you want?"

"Uhr...knittin' patterns? Not sure what ah'm gonna be this month. Me an' Rainbow had a bake-off this last week an' we kinda lost track o' time."

Twilight had returned to the library floor by now with a selection of relevant books for both herself and the farmer. "AJ...is there *anything* you and Rainbow don't do competitively?"

Applejack frowned in thought. Before she could answer, the library shuddered as a cyan cannonball tumbled through the window and hit the wall.

It resolved, predictably enough, into Rainbow Dash, who rolled to her hooves and started looking through the books she'd dislodged. "Let's see. Costumes, costumes..."

A rattled Twilight addressed her from behind. "Can I *help* you, Dash?"

"Huh? Help me?" The pegasus looked over her shoulder with confusion. "I dunno...AJ might think that was cheating. Nah, I'm good." She resumed

sifting through books on diverse subjects like swimming pool maintenance and regional taxation policy, tossing most of them aside.

"Excuse me!" Twilight caught some of the discarded books in her magic and brought them around to Dash's eyes. "In this library, *I'm* the only one who gets to abuse the source material. I take it you're *also* looking for a book on costumes?"

Rainbow Dash glanced over uneasily at Applejack, who stared confidently back. "Heh. I guess we both had the same idea. But that's okay. I'll just read faster than her. I do everything faster."

"She really does," muttered the farmer. "And it ain't always something worth tootin' your horn about," she added loudly.

"That's it!" exclaimed Rainbow, shaking the books off her head and back. "I'll make a fake horn! Everyone will think I'm a unicorn!"

"Oh yeah?" retorted Applejack, drawing near. "Well, ah'm gonna make fake *wings*!"

"Well *I'm* gonna tie *down* my wings, so no one knows I have any!"

"*I'm* gonna have wings *and* a horn, just to *really* confuse 'em!"

Twilight managed to wedge herself between the bickering pair. "Well, I guess that answers my question! You two will compete over *anything*!"

"Sure will!" replied Applejack proudly. "With us, every peck on the cheek turns into a tongue war."

"Every romantic stroll turns into a footrace," added Dash.

"Or a poetry contest!" said AJ.

"Or *both*!" countered Dash.

"Every supper date turns into an eatin' contest."

"Or a cook-off!"

"You kiddin' me? Half the time, ah can cook faster'n y'all can eat!"

"Only because half the time, you're cooking disgusting stuff *on purpose*."

"Apple rhubarb is not disgusting!"

"It is to me and you know it!"

"Ah guess *some* of us have hardier stomachs than others!"

"Well *some* of us can tell the stem of the plant from the actual *fruit*!!"

Each retort brought the pair of tense bodies and glaring faces closer together. Again, Twilight was moved to split them up. "You know, I'm astonished you two ever found time to fall in love."

Applejack sat back, slightly chastened. "Ah fell in love faster'n she did," she muttered.

"Nuh-uh! I fell for you *twice* as fast!"

"Well, ah fell harder."

"Maybe so, but I fell from ten times higher!"

"Are we...are we still bein' metaphorical?"

"Wow," interrupted Twilight. "Things aren't ever quiet with you two, are they?"

"Oh," said Rainbow, happening to glance at a big sign reading QUIET on the wall. "Sorry."

"Oop! Sorry, Twilight," added Applejack.

"No no, it's fine! What I meant was... you two have plenty of spice in your lives...right?"

They both looked oddly at the unicorn. "Spice?" asked Applejack.

"Uh huh! You know...Pizzazz? Zest? You're never bored, are you?"

"Well, no," praised Rainbow, "because AJ here makes even farming exciting. I don't know how she does it, because it sure *looks* boring from the outside."

"It's all about pride," she explained.

"I know! I've been cultivating my pride," Rainbow answered, fluttering up a few feet.

"You still ain't got a farmer's pride," chastised Applejack.

"You're right, 'cause I'm still a weather pony at heart! And we've got a whole *different* sort of pride!"

"An' I took you fer good weather an' bad," chuckled Applejack.

"For richer or for poorer," added Rainbow Dash.

"Fer better or fer worse," countered Applejack.

"For better *and* for worse!" chimed Rainbow.

"Okay, knock it off," said Twilight. "I only ask because the Princess wrote in her latest letter that..." She lowered her voice so that Spike, who was helping a patron, wouldn't hear. "...she thinks my and Fluttershy's home life could be more exciting."

She was met with silence. "Could be *more* excitin'?" deadpanned Applejack. "Well, tarnation if ah know how. Don't you two do a crossword together, like, every day?"

"Yeah, I don't know," said Rainbow Dash, carrying the joke. "If that cottage of yours were any more exciting, we might have to put up warning fences."

"You'd be keepin' the whole town up at night," added AJ.

"And Pinkie might just put out a hit on you if you threw any more wild parties," added Dash.

"What? Pinkie would nev...oh." Twilight chuckled. "Sarcasm. Right."

"If I were you, ah wouldn't worry," Applejack confided. "Each home's got its own rhythm, after all."

"My old house didn't," said Rainbow, still hovering above them. "It was more like the part of the music where no one's playing, and you can take a nap."

"Well, that's a rhythm, of sorts," said Applejack. "But you're happier followin' the rhythm of the earth, aren'tcha?"

The pegasus flapped lower. "I follow your rhythm," she flirted.

"Yeah? You keep up pretty good," said the earth pony.

Rainbow glanced at the mess of books she'd created and then narrowed her eyes lasciviously. "What do you say we check out our stuff, and then head back home for a refresher session?"

"Uh, girls..." said Twilight nervously, indicating Spike's presence with her head.

"A refresher? Dash, ah was *born* refreshed!"

"I don't even know what that means!" said Rainbow. "But I bet I give *you* an orgasm before you give *me* one."

"That so? Bring it on!" retorted Applejack, her eyes fierce.

Twilight instantly created a shimmering cone of silence around Spike and his patron. "I did *not* just hear that."

Rainbow laughed at the librarian's reaction. "Heh, that's tame compared to some of the bets we get into. You should hear how we're gonna decide who gets to be the first biological mother."

"Now, now...don't wanna give anypony ideas," chided Applejack.

"Why not? She said she needed more spice in her life. Oh hey, I know!" Rainbow landed behind Twilight, wings still raised. "How about we let Twilight watch?"

Applejack's features rose with astonishment. "Now that's an idea! Wanna come home with us, Twilight?"

Twilight was shaking her head in terror, her face fuchsia. "I couldn't possibly!"

"Aw, pleeease?" begged Rainbow. "You can be the judge!"

But Twilight couldn't take any more. She piled the books with knitting patterns in a neat stack on a table, pulled the book she was looking for out of the pile, and zipped off, leaving a puff of white smoke in her wake. The competitive couple was left blinking in amazement.

"Ah bet ah can do that," said Applejack.

"Oh yeah? I bet I can make it rainbow-colored," rejoined her lover.

"You're on! Seeya at home!" said Applejack, upon which she adopted a dramatic runner's pose and shot off, leaving the room clouded with dust.

"Gonna beatcha there!" shouted Rainbow, soaring off through the window.

Spike hurried to the door and looked after the racing pair. "Wait! You forgot your books!" But the two were long out of earshot.

"Huh," he said, trotting back to put the books away. "Well, I'm sure they'll come up with something. I wonder what that cone of silence thing was all about!"

#6: *PR—Playing House*

Fluttershy picked her way along the gravel path leading to town, her skirts getting tangled whenever she had to step over so much a pebble. Since the whole path was made of pebbles, it was taking a while. Twilight looked back impatiently from ahead. "Angel Two! At this rate we won't get there in time for the grand unveiling, let alone the Dancing Sea!"

The pegasus let out a whimper. "I'm not so sure this is a good idea. What if Drizzle is there?"

Twilight paused to look over Fluttershy's costume. With lilac chiffon covering her body, light orange strands woven throughout her mane and tail, a fake umbrella cutie mark, and even a five-petaled blossom in her hair, she did look strikingly like the meek weather pony. Twilight herself was similarly disguised as Romana, a local watchmaker's assistant believed by many to live a double life. Her hair was done up in dramatic swooshes of light and dark blue, her fake cutie mark an hourglass. They'd worked all day on their costumes, though Fluttershy had never been quite comfortable with the whole concept.

"If she shows up, she'll be dressed as someone else!" consoled Twilight. "So no one will know."

"But she'll know," breathed Fluttershy. "And so will Romana."

"Eh, it'll be good for a laugh!" Twilight replied.

Fluttershy continued to inch along the path. "But aren't most ponies going to be dressed as fantastic beasts, or legendary figures, or...?"

Twilight shook her head. "That doesn't matter. The book I checked out—er, well, forgot to officially check out—said that there's a difference between a costume ball and a masquerade. In a costume ball, you try to dazzle everyone with images of the strange and exotic, or play a role and stretch your boundaries! But a masquerade is less about the costume than it is about disguising your identity. The whole idea is that no one should know who anypony is until the grand reveal! And we're sure to fool *everypony* in these outfits!"

" I don't like fooling ponies," whispered Fluttershy. But Twilight was ahead on the road again, and didn't hear.

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As Twilight strode through the doors to the Town Hall's sizable auditorium, where the ball was being held, the first thing she encountered was Pinkie Pie, appearing with her characteristic squealy gasp. Twilight looked at her in horror—had the perspicacious pink pony already seen through her disguise? But no, Pinkie gave the same gasp to Fluttershy...and to the next five ponies who walked in. She seemed to be gasping at everyone, although she varied her tone and direction of approach, occasionally clinging to the mantel in order to gasp diagonally from above. But that made sense, as Pinkie was dressed as a caterpillar.

The hall, meanwhile, was resplendent. Its walls had been covered in smooth white sheets topped with streamers, and additional streamers connected various points of the roof and upper window corners to one another. There were stacks of blue-green boxes against the walls on which fuzzy wild sculptures had been placed, evoking the vague sense of a coral reef. Beside these sat tables of refreshments against the sides of the room, but for once they were out of the way. The focus was on the dance floor, a polished circular space cut from the trunk of a single tremendous tree, the natural grain accented by rings of peach and topaz. From the center of the ceiling descended a paper chandelier constructed from endless curved pockets of white and beige paper. Little points of light were somehow suspended within it. There were tables and seats scattered throughout the room and divans along the walls. Finally, near the front entrance was a jungle gym on which several children, Spike among them, were playing, strands of their wayward costumes dangling beneath the bars. Pinkie leapt from the mantel to the jungle gym using only her torso and her teeth while Twilight watched in amazement. The green-and-black-clad earth pony proceeded to curl among the bars like a real caterpillar might.

"It's so crowded," murmured Fluttershy from beside Twilight. She was right, of course. More than half the town must have been there, but it was hard to tell who had come, because the costumes were fairly amazing...and because there was just so much swirling activity that Twilight couldn't keep

her eyes focused on anyone for long. She found herself shaking her head to clear it...but hardened herself, remembering her mission.

"That's how it should be," she told Fluttershy. "Remember—we're here to have a spicy time!"

Fluttershy looked anxious anew, wandering off to sit on one of the divans. Oh, well. Someone was certain to strike up a conversation with her. Meanwhile, Twilight went to go find what excitement she could.

"Romana!" exclaimed a cultured voice that could only belong to Rarity. Twilight turned to see the host adorned with butterfly wings much like the ill-fated pair she'd worn to Cloudsdale, only even more elaborate, and no doubt non-functional. She also had on delicate little antennae and a swatch of black wrapped around her midsection to complete the effect.

Twilight smiled demurely. She said nothing for now, only bowing.

"So good of you to come!" continued Rarity. "But dear, didn't you hear this was a masquerade? Surely a few wisps of chiffon and a few streaks in your hair don't constitute...OHH." Twilight grinned: Rarity had gotten it. "You aren't Romana, are you? You're...somepony else! Very good. Very mysterious!" Rarity chuckled and bowed back.

"I suppose we'll just have to see!" said Twilight, taking care to disguise her voice.

"We will!" replied Rarity. "If we can't see through your disguise, perhaps we'll reveal who you truly are through questions and games later tonight! But for now—welcome to the ball!"

"My pleasure!" said Twilight. "But I must ask—is there a significance to the fact that you and Pinkie Pie are dressed as different metamorphic stages of the same life form? Is it some kind of symbolic restructuring of the marital relationship?"

Rarity blinked, her antennae bobbing. "Er...hello Twilight. Good to have you!"

Twilight winced. "I guess the cunning questions and games won't be necessary, huh?"

"Your personality does tend to shine through," Rarity replied. "Nothing at all to be ashamed of! And your Romana costume is quite convincing. But to answer your question, no, not really—we just thought it would make for a fun thematic connection. And, well, I am three years Pinkie's senior, after all."

"Really? But I thought the two of you were in the same class in Hoofington. Isn't that how you met?"

"It was an age-integrated classroom," Rarity explained. "Apart from which, Pinkie skipped a grade."

"Yep!" exclaimed Pinkiepillar, swinging in suddenly from the bottom of the chandelier, which didn't look like it should be able to support her weight. "But don't worry! I went back and did it later."

Twilight laughed awkwardly. "Well, given how things turned out, I'm sure it was for the best. Did the two of you have any clue, way back then, that you'd end up married?"

"Clue?!" exclaimed Pinkie, falling to the floor in a snakelike heap. "You mean they leave *clues* for that sort of thing?"

"Um...well, I mean...there might have been some sign..."

"Of romance?" said Rarity. "I think not quite yet, at that tender age. But I was one of Pinkie's earliest supporters when it came to her hobby of...entertaining!"

"Hobby?!" exclaimed Pinkie, rising from the floor to menace the butterfly. "You call this a hobby? I think you meant to say, 'Ultrasupreme joy and passion!'" The pink caterpony stood up straight within her costume, wobbled, and fell upon her well-cushioned back.

"Of course, dear. Pinkie always did have a passion for parties...and I've always had a passion for decorating!! It's only natural we would end up together."

"I can see that!" said Twilight. "And I know you love hosting soirées and dinner parties! But why this? Why have you started throwing masquerades every month?"

"Because every *two* months isn't often *enough*!" squealed Pinkie.

"And because of the allure!" cried Rarity. "Think of it—an entire ballroom full of mysterious strangers, each with a powerful secret—the fact that, after all is said and done, and danced, and breathed..."

"...and sucked up, and spit out, and rolled flat, and circled into little spirals..." added Pinkie.

"...you knew them all along," concluded Rarity. "And you may be surprised! During these masquerades, so many ponies have told me they've been astounded by what they've learned about their fellow townsfolk! The roles we play! The sides we choose to show, and not to show, when we get the chance for a fresh approach! This, Twilight, this is the infinitely varied appeal of the masquerade!!"

"That," said Pinkie, "*plus*, we get to play dress-up all day and no one thinks it's weird!"

"Which is, of course, one of the chief reasons I got into fashion in the first place," concluded Rarity.

"Huh! That sounds a lot like the theory in the book I read last night!" exclaimed Twilight. "It was talking about how in a setting where no one has any preconcep—oh MY."

She'd stopped talking because of the arrival of an amazing figure. From hoof to mane, *this* was an ANGEL. In billowing silver gray, with lofty wings bearing tremendous, perfectly shaped feathers, an amazingly coifed tail, a shimmering halo, and an expression of perfect serenity behind a face draped in white veils, the figure entering the hall dwarfed even Princess Celestia in grandeur, if not quite in stature. Twilight found herself falling to her knees in the mysterious pony's direction. From the crowd, she heard Derpy's voice cry, "AANNNGGEEELLL!" providing evidence for Twilight's

theory that the gray mailmare had never forgotten her time in the place of unborn souls.

The crowd parted for the huge, charismatic newcomer, who paced forward on silent, graceful legs. She—it? She, probably, came to Rarity and Pinkie Pie and lowered herself to one rear knee. "I thank you for extending your invitation," she said in a voice both beautiful and buzzingly distant, as though spoken through layers of cloth—which, of course, it probably was. Still, the effect was amazing.

"You're quite welcome," said Rarity, almost as stunned as anyone. Pinkie merely stared.

"You're...you're not Princess Celestia, are you?" asked Twilight weakly. "Or...or Princess Luna, for that matter?"

The angel, smiling a secret smile, shook her head. "They are the keepers of this realm alone. I hail from another."

"Well." Twilight had forgotten to disguise her voice. "That's, uh...something, all right! You have a very nice...costume." On impulse, Twilight turned to check on Fluttershy, who was, sure enough, still sitting on the divans near the entrance, though she'd struck up a conversation with a ribbon-festooned pony who might have been Cloud Kicker. So the angel wasn't *her* angel in disguise, as much as Twilight would have loved for it to be.

"As do we all, as we pass through life," said the angel mysteriously. She, or it, moved away toward the back of the room, while amazed ponies either bowed or struck up timid conversation with her as she went. Twilight watched for a while, transfixed, before pulling her attention back to her hosts.

"Do you have any idea...?" she whispered. But they only shook their heads.

There was a game, later, where everypony gathered into circles and asked each other questions from cards, to be answered in character or according to whim. This was enjoyable for Twilight because it addressed some unusual aspects of friendship she hadn't seen much of hitherto—where one

draws the line between respecting a friend's autonomy and rescuing her from self-destructive behavior, for example. Despite a number of insightful and humorous moments, she wished she could have been in the same circle as the angel. That must have been quite a game. In Twilight's circle, the funniest moment was when Scootaloo, dressed as a pirate, asked an overelaborate black monster with a hidden face, five black horns and three black tails whether it had ever considered competitive aeronautics. "How'm I supposed to do that without any wings??" the monster had blurted. Everyone laughed. It was evident that Scootaloo had somehow identified the presence of her hero, Rainbow Dash, beneath all the folds of cloth and papier-mâché. Maybe she'd actually recognized her smell—Twilight wouldn't have been surprised.

And there were other diversions, as well as hot food being intermittently served at the refreshment tables by stallions dressed as lobsters and crabs. Twilight took a tray of delicious fare back to Fluttershy, hoping to see how she was doing. It seemed she wasn't having such a bad time, so long as she took things easy.

"I've been having some great conversations with the weather ponies," she told Twilight privately, seated together on the long cushions. "I never knew that being a weather pony could be so interesting. I'm almost tempted to try it in real life!"

"Maybe you should!" Twilight suggested. "I'm sure Rainbow would be glad to train you. She got such a blast out of teaching you how to cheer."

"Well," said Fluttershy modestly, "I don't know if you could really call it a...a *blast*. It was more of a...more of a..."

Twilight leaned in to catch her wife's whisper.

Fluttershy erupted in remembered excitement. "...A SONIC RAINBOOOM!! EEEEEAAUUGHH! YYEEEEAAHHH!!!" She leapt from the divan with wings upstretched...and then fell to the floor, chattering her teeth and looking aghast.

Twilight leapt over her, only to find everyone nearby staring. "Wow, Angel Two! I mean...Drizzle! I mean...That was...wow!"

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to...it just all came back to me at once," said the mortified pegasus.

Twilight chuckled. "That's okay. But I think you may have spoiled your cover..." She glanced around to see that the nearby ponies were now indulging in knowing smiles. "Still! You've tapped a place in yourself that's powerful and deep, and I love that. You've just gone through a transformation!" She gave Fluttershy a kiss, evoking a blush.

"I guess that's what masquerades are for," said Fluttershy. "Oh, but look, Twilight!"

"Romana!"

"Er...Romana. Sorry! But I think the Dancing Sea is starting!"

It certainly was! This was a long dance that started slowly, with one pair in the center of the room—in this case, Pinkie and Rarity. At the conclusion of each verse, each partner was to go off to find a new partner elsewhere in the room, thus doubling the number of dancers with every verse until everypony would be dancing. The streamers, now predominantly blue and green, somehow bobbed along overhead, and the coral sculptures on the blue-green boxes whirled about like little fans.

The first verse ended and Rarity went to dance with her little sister, Sweetie Belle, while Pinkie chose Big Macintosh, dressed in hero-warrior garb. At the end of the second verse, Sweetie Belle went straight to the angel. The huge celestial figure seemed flattered, and danced enchantingly with the little unicorn, sweeping her easily about, while the room watched in enchantment. Then the next verse began, and there were sixteen dancers. After that, Spike, who'd been chosen by Apple Bloom, went to take Twilight onto the floor, and from then Twilight lost track of who was where. She was awlirl. She danced with the five-horned monster, with the proprietor of Quills and Sofas, and finally—to her astonishment, found herself with the real Romana, who had just shown up. The two of them danced rather awkwardly together, but when others around them started to laugh, they loosened up and laughed as well.

Twilight glanced around and saw Fluttershy dancing in a heavenly trance with the mysterious angel. She felt a stroke of jealousy cross her heart...and then realized she was jealous of the angel, not of Fluttershy. Twilight wanted those temporarily lilac-colored hooves in her own. She wanted that sweet, leafy, natural smell nuzzled up against her face. She

found herself looking forward to the night's end, when the masquerade would all be over and it would just be herself and her angel again...free to concoct their own spices.

Twilight hurried after the dance back to her wife. The two of them sat quiet at a table in the back. "Oh, Twilight!" said Fluttershy. "What an amazing time! We should come every month! I already have so many ideas for costumes!"

"That's wonderful! But more importantly, I think I've solved our problem!"

"The...the not enough spice problem?"

"Oh, Fluttershy, that was never a real problem. We can have as much or as little spice as we like—no one can tell us how our marriage is supposed to taste! ...To strain a metaphor. No, I meant the pet name problem!"

"Oh." Fluttershy glanced at the unearthly silver-gray angel striding through the room, and then looked, embarrassed, back to Twilight. "You mean how you'd like to call me Angel, even though that name is taken in our household?"

"Aheheh. Yes. I mean, seeing what looks like the real thing sort of put things in perspective. But beyond that...the fact that you're having fun here...the way you suddenly burst out with that cheer...it made me see you in a new way."

Fluttershy seemed a little afraid at this. "A new way? A good way, I hope!"

"Yes, definitely! You transformed! And what else, in nature, transforms?"

The naturalist was shier than ever. "A lot of things transform, Twilight." She glanced furtively at Pinkie and Rarity, in costume, strolling together. "But I guess you mean...how a caterpillar transforms into a butterfly."

"Exactly." Twilight gave her a kiss on the forehead. "And from now on...you're my Butterfly."

"Huh?"

Twilight grinned. "Butterfly! It's a Spoonerism! Well, kind of. But you *can* fly...and your coat's the color of butter...so...why not?"

Fluttershy rose from her seat to give Twilight a huge hug. "Twilight, that's the sweetest thing anyone's ever said about me! Or at least...I know the way you meant it is. Yes! Yes, I'll be your Butterfly. I'll be every bit as beautiful and delicate as you have the right to expect any butterfly to be."

They hugged, and nuzzled, for quite some time. Pinkie and Rarity joined them at their table.

"Awww," said Pinkie. "They look so adorable! And yet, it's as if Drizzle and Romana suddenly decided to make out! How weird would that be? The Doctor would be so jealous."

"Of which?"

"Of both!" Pinkie gave Rarity a warm cuddle under her chin. "You remember the first time we dressed up as each other? That was pretty intense."

"I certainly do. I seem to recall I had the scent of fresh cookies in my mane for a week!"

"You could do woo-oorse!" singsonged Pinkie. "Oooh! And remember that time you dressed up like Princess Celestia and I dressed up like her first lover, Incitatus? That one took *research*!"

Rarity stood up, giving Pinkie one last nuzzle. "While it's true we've had a wide variety of *fascinating* games, I'm sure we don't want to bore our guests," she said with a hint of embarrassment. "Besides which!" she announced in a louder voice. "It's time for..." Her horn started to glow, and the room dimmed, except for the brilliant points of light in the paper chandelier. "...The Grand Reveal!!"

There was a roaring cheer. Everypony hurried to the dance floor and the area surrounding it. Rarity took center stage and waited for the commotion to subside.

"Pinkamina and I would like to thank you for another tremendous evening of alluring dissimulation and revelry!" she declared, her wings bobbing. There was another cheer. "But now, the time has come to be unmasked, and to stand true and undisguised before friend and foe alike!"

"Aw, don't be silly, Rarity!" said Pinkie, slinking insectlike into the center. "We're all friends here!"

After yet another cheer, Rarity gave an elegant nod. "Too true. And so! Are there any...requests, for who might be the first to unveil?!"

"How about the owlbear!?" shouted Apple Bloom before anyone else could speak, pointing at Spike.

There was a general groan. "'What?!' asked Pinkie, twirling about within her costume. "You mean that's not really an owlbear?"

"No, believe it or not!" exclaimed Spike.

Pinkie's eyes narrowed. "Harry? The cavehouse bear? Is that you?"

"No," laughed Spike, now excited.

Pinkie's eyes squinted further. "Are you an Ursa Teeny-Tiny?"

"No! I'm Spike!" He removed his mask with a flourish and there was general laughter. Of course just about everyone had known it, but one never knew just what could slip by Pinkie's brain.

"Ohhhh!" she said, swaying back. "Hi, Spike!"

"Enough of this!" shouted someone. "We want to know who the angel is!"

"Yeah! Who's the angel?" echoed the three-tailed monster.

Rarity turned to the majestic angel and was about to speak when Pinkie gasped again. "You mean she's not *really* an angel?!"

"Pinkie!" said Rarity sharply. But she followed it up with a laugh and a nose rub. "It's up to *her* to tell us! Isn't it?"

Pinkie leapt a foot off the ground, an impressive feat with her bulky caterpillar tail. "It sure is! So who are you, Miss Angel?"

The angel slowly looked over the assembled crowd. "Surely," she said in her strange voice, "some among you know me. Are there no blessed here? None with the true sight?"

"Nnnnnnope!" said Pinkie.

"Show us!" called Sweetie Belle, along with half the crowd.

The angel shrugged, her massive wings falling limp to the ground. She stepped down off her stilts, kicked off the bronze support holding up her tail, dropped her wire-suspended halo, shook the layers of carefully shaped gauzy veils from her face and neck, and spit out the harmonica reed in her mouth. "Well shoot. I figgered at least *some*'a y'all'd recognize me."

The three-tailed monster's response was almost lost amid the roar of surprise and groans from the crowd. "Applejack!?"

The orange earth pony took a bow in Rainbow's direction. "You didn't even know me?" She snorted once, but her amazement turned proud within a moment. "Well, ah guess there's no *question* who wins this masquerade!"

"What?!" exclaimed Pinkie. "There's no winning in masquerades!" She glanced to Rarity. "Is there?"

Rainbow shook off her five-horned mask to reveal a look of disgust. "AJ, how on earth did...I don't...but...the way you talked! The way you moved! It was...you *never* act that way!"

"I *have* told you about mah trip to Manehattan, haven't I?" said Applejack, grabbing the tangle of white cloth enshrouding her and whipping it loose with a single tug. "Mah Aunt Orange ain't no miser. She got me some classical training so's I'd fit in better—figured ah may as well put it to good use, now an' then!"

Rainbow scoffed, shook her head, and then leapt from her own costume with a massive flying leap, leaving the shell standing for foals to marvel over. "You! You, Applejack, have been holding *out* on me."

"What? Never. I didn't reckon a gal like you'd have any use for fancy angelic manners, and *you* never *asked!*"

The crowd groaned. "What do you say, folks?" asked Rainbow. "Was she holding out on me?"

There was a mixed reaction—some boos, some cheers, some whoops, some laughs. Rainbow didn't bother weighing it all; she strutted over to Applejack and grabbed her in a winghug, a mischievous look in her eyes.

"Face it, AJ. You've gotta make it up to me."

Now *that* got cheers, even a mild one from Fluttershy. "All right," said Applejack, "I'll do mah best." She planted a kiss on Rainbow's lips that got the crowd roaring again. By the time Rarity managed to get things under control again, everypony was unveiling themselves, the tension of the night over. The lights came on again, the streamers started to fall, and there was carefree laughter and lightness everywhere.

"What do you think, Butterfly?" Twilight asked her wife as they strolled past the buffet. "Ready to head home?"

"I don't know, Twilight. I think I could use another hour or two." She lifted her half-unraveled costume, her coat now an alluring mix of yellow and lilac. "To unwind."

Twilight laughed and nodded, unwrapping a layer of chiffon with her magic. "I know how you feel."

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Dear Princess Celestia,

I learned this week that everyone has a secret side—at least one, if not more! That secret side doesn't make us immoral, or duplicitous...it actually makes us more who we are, even if that isn't easy to see on the surface. And as we get to know people better and better—especially if we've made a commitment to them for life—it's more and more important to show our

secret sides, to learn about them and embrace them in each other. I personally believe there's always more to discover. And even if that process of discovery isn't always interesting to those on the outside—sorry about boring you with the tea guessing game—it's important to the people in the relationship...as important as anything.

I wonder how many secret sides you have, Princess! No need to tell—I'm just thinking out loud. Only not out loud. In writing. I'm thinking out loud quietly. You know what I mean.

*Your ever-faithful student,
Twilight Sparkle*

CHAPTER 3:

TO DASH OR NOT TO DASH

or

LARGER THAN LIFE

#7: AR—Industrial Mavens

In the original barn at Sweet Apple Acres—one of the few buildings on the farm never to have been fitted with lightning tubes, for sentimental reasons—the slatted walls were aglow with a film of light, broken up by a spectroscopic array of colors from where a single lantern shone through Rainbow Dash's outstretched tail. The rest of her was curled up over a half-empty seed barrel whose contents sifted faintly as she rocked it back and forth in the course of trying to curtail her breathing. Against the barrel, she held an envelope—slate blue with a diagonal yellow streak.

Some distance away sat Applejack, perplexed and worried. Rainbow wanted to calm her nerves, but she just couldn't find the words. Sometimes there was just too much to say.

The farmer sighed. "How about I just take a stab at it?" she suggested, her tone grim.

Rainbow nodded. If things were grim, it was her own fault. She'd dragged Applejack away from a quiet supper with her siblings, one of the few relaxed parts left in her life. There'd been no other time to get her attention.

Applejack leaned forward, her head coming into the light. "Well, looks like you've gotcherself some sort of official document there. Must be somethin' weighty, or y'wouldn't be broken up over it like this."

Rainbow groped for a way to broach the subject, but her stomach was clenched up and she simply couldn't talk.

"If it's bad news, Rainbow, you know ah'm here for ya. Me an' Big Mac, an' Granny, an' Applebloom, an' Turnover an' all the staff...we're in your corner. You know that, don'tcha?"

A tear slipped out, like a hailstone slipping past the guard of an exhausted goalie. "I know," Rainbow sobbed.

Applejack crept forward. "Oh, Rainbow. There, there!" The farmer daubed at Rainbow's eyes with a kerchief, and Rainbow's instincts took this as license to cry further, though that was the last thing she wanted. She smothered her face in the kerchief, trying to run herself dry. It made no sense to cry over something like this. Rainbow was supposed to be tough, able to face the future head-on. Yet here she was, sprawled over a barrel and sobbing into a hankey. Why couldn't she be happy?

Applejack sopped up the last of the tears and stood back, appraising her friend. Rainbow saw a thought come to her, a dark thought. "Dash," she said, "it seems to me ah've seen those colors before. Blue an' yellor? Why that's..." She froze. "It's the Wonderbolts, ain't it. They turned you down, didn't they? Oh, Dash!"

Still Rainbow clung to the barrel and snorted warm breaths through her nose. Still she didn't talk.

Applejack straightened. "Those bastards. Those halfcocked, oatbrained *bastards!*" Her head shook. "I mean...I'm sorry, Dash. I shouldn't talk about them thataway. They're your heroes. I dunno how y'feel about them now, but...they're still your heroes, and ah shouldn't say such things." She surged forward. "But how could they not take you? How?! You *told* me all about your audition, an' how y'*aced* it. You flew twirls tighter'n a beanpole, an' your formations were perfect, weren't they, Dash? That's what you *told* me. You flew it *perfect*, and they still turned you down. Why, Dash? What'd they tell you? They give you some cornball excuse?" As Rainbow remained silent, Applejack stamped the dirt floor in consternation. "Well, tell me they gave you *some*thin'. They wouldn't just send you a form letter. ...Would they? No, they *wouldn't*. They wouldn't, Dash, not after you saved their cockamamie lives!! Durnit, Dash, what'd they *tell* you?!"

Rainbow was at the wall now, and there was no way but through. "They said I'm in!!" she cried, shoving the barrel away.

Applejack, now holding the barrel underhoof, was staring. "You're in?" There were several moments of silence. "You're *in* the *Wonderbolts*?"

"If I say yes, then *yeah!*—I'm in!

Applejack rolled the barrel forward, her demeanor almost threatening as the seeds rattled. "*If* you say yes?? Rainbow Dash, why in Celestia's shinin' world would you not say yes?!"

Now Rainbow wished for tears, but they wouldn't come. "Well that...that's the problem," she whimpered. "That's what I don't know how to tell you."

There was no mistaking it now. Applejack's eyes were searing hot—she was furious. "You mean to tell me that you have *scored* your *dream*, Rainbow Miriam, and now you're afraid to take it?? An' you don't even know *why?!?*"

"I do know why!" Rainbow protested, stumbling back. "I just...I can't explain!"

Applejack kept advancing, shoving the barrel aside. "You can't, huh? Dash, you've been *yearnin'* to join that group as long as I've known you! And now that it's at your feathertips...you're turnin' out to be a *coward?*"

That was it. No one was allowed to call Rainbow Dash a coward, not even her best friend. "Take that back!!" she shouted, surging until her face was almost touching Applejack's. "I came to you because you're so good at *listening*, Applejack! Are you listening now?! I'm telling you, it's complicated!"

"Oh yeah? What's complicated about it?"

"That's what I'm trying to—geez, AJ, could you calm down? I don't need you yelling at me! I've had a tough day."

She snorted. "Oh yeah, *real* tough. While the rest of us toil for each inch o' ground, earnin' our dreams bit by bit, you get a letter that says you're gettin' everything y'ever wanted! And *you're* the one who had a tough day?!"

That was an insult Rainbow didn't appreciate. "You think I didn't *work* to be the best?!"

"I'm not sayin' that, Rainbow. But you sure don't work like a regular pony does! You were born with speed an' flash. Do you think I was born with what I have? You think Rarity was born with wealth? She was an orphan, Dash! An' I worked hard every week o' my life, and I feel like cryin' sometimes, too. All for my dreams." Applejack huffed one last time and stood down. "So you tell me now, Rainbow—why would y'even *think* of turnin' the Wonderbolts down?"

Rainbow took a deep breath, tapping the envelope. "The training schedule's in here, Applejack. It's really intense..."

Applejack's eyes flared again. "An' you didn't think it would be?! This *is* the Wonderbolts we're talkin'."

"That's not what I meant! Listen, AJ! They sent me a note." She recited from memory: "As a Wonderbolt, your first and only allegiance will be to us. This is not a hobby. This is not a job. This is a way of life. You will be a Wonderbolt first and Rainbow Dash second. If you understand and accept the responsibilities of the enclosed schedule, then we welcome you on board.' And AJ, it's *all the time*. There are no vacations! If I join them, I'll be lucky to find *one day* to come back and visit. I won't...I won't have a home anymore. Not Cloudsdale, or Ponyville, or anywhere."

"But...but Rainbow." Applejack offered a tender hoof. "We'll still be your friends! There's no helpin' it—we'll be friends 'til the sun sings her last hurrah. If you can't come home, we'll go to your shows, wherever we can."

Rainbow swallowed and looked away. "It's not just that. Friends are great, but...look at you and Rarity! You weren't really happy 'til you had each other."

Applejack tilted her head suspiciously. "You worried about windin' up alone, Dash?"

"Winding up, nothing! I'm worried about *being* alone! How am I ever going to meet anypony if we're always on the move?"

"How are you—Rainbow, you're on the verge o' celebrity! How could you *not* meet somepony? You'll have fans stampedin' to get to ya! Take your pick!"

Rainbow cringed. "But what'll...what'll the Wonderbolts think? What'll happen when they find out...when they find out I'm..."

The farmer's eyes narrowed. "When they find out you're what, Dash?"

She swallowed. "That I'm...you know. Straight."

Applejack gritted her teeth and kicked the barrel with tremendous force, knocking it to the wall. "Is *that* what this is about?! Rainbow, we've been over this a hundred times! There is *nothin' wrong with being straight!* If there weren't no straight ponies, why, there wouldn't be no ponies at all!"

Why did this have to be so painful? "I know, but—"

"I don't *care* what yer parents taught you! Some of the greatest ponies in history were straight, even if they didn't admit it at the time."

"But none of the Wonderbolts are—"

"Ah had a phase when I thought I might be straight. I told you that, didn't I? Believe me, ah know how you feel. Ah was confused. But ah kept my head up an' stayed proud. Ain't you proud to be who you are, Rainbow Dash?"

Tragically, Rainbow wasn't so sure anymore. "I don't know! I'm so scared, Applejack. Now that's it's so close...I'm so scared!" The sobs were returning.

Applejack was quick with her kerchief. "What're you scared of, Rainbow?" she murmured. "Rejection? Lemme tell you—everypony around here already knows you're straight. The way you act so much like a stallion sometimes, it's clear you'd rather be with 'em in the sack. But we don't

judge ya, Rainbow. We adore you. We admire you. An' if your fans don't feel the same way, they were never worth it! If the Wonderbolts kick y'out, you'll be no worse off than y'are now, will ya?"

"I don't know," cried Rainbow.

"Well, I'll tell ya. You'll be better off for havin' lived through it. But ah swear, Rainbow, if you tell them Wonderbolts no, they won't ask again. You'll be out of a dream, Rainbow, for good. And what'll you do then? Who'll you be without that dream?"

Rainbow closed her eyes. She felt like Applejack was right, but either one of them could have been missing something. Maybe she could make it on her own as a speed racer. Maybe she could assemble her own group, under her own rules. They could stay in Ponyville three months out of each year, and put less emphasis on formation flying, and more on daredevilry...and they'd be tolerant. Tolerant of everypony.

"Rainbow," Applejack continued, "y'gotta decide what matters more. Flyin' the dream, or meetin' that special stallion. Deep down, you gotta know you probably can't have both, not at the same time."

Rainbow fell into a loose hug with Applejack, muzzle buried in her shoulder. "I wish I knew," she mumbled. "I don't know if I'll ever have love. I don't know *how* to fall in love."

Applejack nuzzled her like only a country girl knows how. "Then ah reckon that's what you gotta learn."

"But how?"

The farmer glanced around the dimly lit barn. "Well. You ain't never stayed on for one of Rarity's visits, have you? You know out schedule?"

Rainbow nodded faintly. "She comes here for one day a week, and you visit her for one day a week."

"That's right. An' we both stay overnight. Now, tomorrow's Sunday, so she'll be here by late afternoon, an' I've got a slew of chores to oversee

before then. So ah can't stay with you tonight, Rainbow. But if you show up tomorrow, we'll do our best t'explain to you how it feels to fall in love."

"Right," murmured Rainbow.

"An' maybe you should ask around, besides. Ask Lyra an' Bonbon how it went for them. Or heck, ask mah brother how he met Caramel, while yer at it."

Applejack was right—Rainbow's reply to the Wonderbolts could wait a few days. And this was something she had to know. Did she have a chance of ever finding love? If her prospects looked bad, Rainbow could join the Wonderbolts with a clear conscience, knowing she wasn't leaving any bigger dreams on the table.

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"Falling in love?" repeated the baby dragon, now verging on juvenile. His eager face fell with a sigh before Rainbow's eyes. "Yep, we've got a section. Follow me."

Rainbow noted the sigh and wondered what had spoiled the notion of love for the lovable tyke. But she followed him to a heart-shaped nook high in one of the walls. He clambered up a ladder and pulled out a tattered book, passing it to Rainbow. "This might be what you're looking for. Otherwise, you can take a look in here. Just...put 'em back when you're done, will you? I have trouble carrying books up this high."

Rainbow glanced at the volume she held. *Love: A Journey of Discovery*. "All right, but can't Twilight just float 'em back?"

Spike descended the ladder, looking sour. "She's busy with research these days. If I so much as knock, she snaps at me, and I'd better have a good reason."

"Aww. But wasn't she doing research the last time I came?"

Spike shrugged helplessly. "It's been months! She still works a shift now and then, but if the library isn't in good shape, it's 'What have you been

doing down here, Spike?' 'Can't I leave you alone for a day, Spike?' It's frustrating!"

Rainbow was receptive to frustration. "No kidding! Think I should go have a talk with Twilight?"

"Be my guest. Just don't blame me if she yells at you for interrupting."

Rainbow glanced past the balcony to the hallway leading to Twilight's study. On second thought, she didn't really need any more strife in her life right now, and she knew how Twilight could be sometimes.

"Maybe later." She let herself sink to the floor. "I should try and get this book read by late afternoon."

"What happens then?" asked Spike as he returned to his place.

"That's when Rarity's going to visit Applejack. And I said I'd be there."

Spike looked at her oddly. "*That's* what this book is for? You're trying to fall in love with *them*?"

"Huh? No!" Rainbow started hovering reflexively. "I just want to know how to fall in love in the first place. And Applejack...said they'd help me work it out."

Again the dragon sighed. "Wish I were in your spot. Have a good time."

Oh, right. Rainbow remembered now. "You mean, you wish you were in *Applejack's* spot, don't you?" she asked sympathetically.

He gave her a doleful look. "Don't remind me."

Rainbow landed. "Hey, I've had crushes, too. I know they're not easy. Nine times out of ten, you haven't even got a chance."

All Spike's frustration came out then in a stream. "So why bother? Why do we even crush at all? Why not just fall in love with whoever's right for us?"

"You think I know?" rejoined Rainbow. "For all I know, if things had gone a little different, I could've ended up with Rarity *or* Applejack. Maybe there *is* no pony right for us. Maybe we just grasp at straws—a crush here, a friendship that boils over there—until finally something takes and we call it done. Maybe I'm doomed to be humiliated a hundred times before I can find true love. Maybe I won't even then." She pounded the book onto the counter. "Guess I'll find out."

Spike sighed again and entered the book into the ledger, passing it back to Rainbow. She tried to find some final words to soften her exit, but nothing came to mind. After a few moments of lingering, she slipped silently out the door.

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It was still strange for Rainbow, flying over Sweet Apple Acres and seeing all the new buildings—the endless storehouses, the processing plants, the seed silo, the barracks. Just watching the gigantic gear-powered juicer in action made her skin crawl.

But it was worse on Sundays and Moondays. That was when they rolled out the red carpet, literally, for Rarity's arrival. The main paths through the orchards were sprinkled with baby straw, with canopies overhead if there was rain scheduled, and awnings from building to building. The house was festooned with flags and banners, and the glow of lightning tubes beamed from all the windows.

Rainbow had flown over the farm when it was like that, but never when coming for a visit. She hadn't wanted to get in the way...and moreover, all the changes disturbed her. Rarity's factory was even worse. Rainbow's friends' lives had changed so much, while hers had stayed the same—it was as if the more time passed, the less real everything became.

Yet here she was. She could see the coach carrying Rarity and her attendants smoothly up the path. There were curtains over its windows and ponies marching alongside playing gentle music—lyres, harps, and woodwinds rather than trumpets. The vehicle rolled up to the foot of the carpet and the attendants ceremoniously opened the doors. Out stepped Rarity.

When Rainbow saw Rarity during the week these days, she was more or less her old self, though busier and with a heavier manner. It was harder to push her buttons these days, and that was her business, of course—she couldn't afford to let anything get to her. Now, Rarity was at her most formal. She wasn't wearing much—just a light open jacket, an official-looking pendant and a neatly knotted coral bow in her mane. Even so, she almost looked like somepony Rainbow didn't know. She and her numerous attendants walked up the carpet, trading quiet words.

Rainbow looked the other way—here came Applejack, a slightly smaller retinue of farm workers fanned out behind her. As orchard owner, she was wearing a slightly fancier hat than normal, lacking a notch but bearing a proud red ribbon. She had on a shapely breast collar displaying a large yellow apple on a green field, and over her haunches she wore a slim caparison with interlocking tree branches and notches that left her cutie marks on display. Rainbow always thought Applejack looked strange dressed up like that—almost like she was an ornamental possession of the very farm she ran.

The two groups were about to meet, so Rainbow dove to land beside them. Rarity's attendants seemed disconcerted, but Rarity faced her with a touching smile. Good—so she'd been warned Rainbow was coming.

"Madame Applejack," said Rarity.

"Madame Rarity," said Applejack, slurring the honorific.

They bowed to each other, as did their companions. Rainbow wondered if she should bow, but she didn't feel like it. She wasn't part of this charade, and she wanted to catch every second.

They all raised their heads together. "How have these last few days treated you?" asked the fashion mogul in a surprisingly gentle tone.

Applejack stepped forward, the two of them sharing an elaborate nuzzle. "Pretty well," she replied as they pulled apart. "Wouldja care to be my guest for the night? We could swap stories."

"I would be honored, Madame Applejack." Rarity bowed again, tossing her mane back. "Your hospitality is legendary."

Applejack smiled and turned back to the farmhouse, leading the way. Their two sets of companions merged behind and beside them, clearly familiar with the ceremony being enacted. Rainbow knew this was mostly for show—they must have a conversation like this one, if not *exactly* like this one, every week. But if it was for show, what was the point?

Applejack faced her as they walked. "Rainbow Dash?"

"Yeah?"

"Would you care t'come inside? Good friends're always welcome, after all."

"And the more, the merrier!" added Rarity, not even looking over.

Rainbow tried not to laugh. It was as if she hadn't been invited in the first place. "Sure, I'll come in!"

A pair of door ponies met them at the door, and then a valet greeted them all formally and went to lead Rarity off to her room. A cook bustled about, preparing tea. The others all bowed and dispersed—returning to their *real* duties, Rainbow guessed. She knew Applejack was successful, but even she couldn't afford to keep a dozen serving ponies around just for show. This whole performance was for Rarity's benefit, a fact Rainbow found both touching and disturbing.

"So this is how you and Rarity get together," said Rainbow, slipping onto a chaise in the living room.

"Yep! Pretty weird, huh?" replied Applejack.

Rainbow hadn't expected her to admit that. "Well...yeah! I mean, it's like the two of you aren't even married."

Applejack settled herself on a rug. "An' I'll tell ya somethin', Rainbow. When she an' I started to realize that we liked each other—an' I mean *really* liked each other—it warn't easy fer either of us. I mean, can you imagine? Fallin' in love with someone who drives you crazy on so many levels?"

Rainbow wasn't sure. "Is it anything like wanting to eat sweets you really shouldn't be eating if you want to stay in shape?"

Applejack laughed. "Better ask Pinkie about that. Naw, it's not like anythin' else ah can think of. It's infuriatin'. And intense. Rarity's a preenin', glamour-obsessed prig, an' she almost made Twilight's first sleepover a livin' hell. But once we got past that—"

"Excuse me!?" Rarity was returning down the stairs now. "I suppose I did it singlehoofedly, did I? Are you forgetting your own slovenly, stubborn, mud-and-spittle-strewn hick ways?"

"Ah ain't forgettin'," said Applejack, not missing a beat. "But fer me, that's how things're done. You can't tell me y'don't love me for it."

Rarity smiled, reaching the floor. "It's your authenticity I love. Your brazen strength of heart, disguised by neither scruple nor modesty."

Applejack smiled to Rainbow, tipping her hat. "An' as much as ah complain about her prissiness, the truth is...Rarity coh-tour fascinates me. Always has. It's like she's some...enchanted creature, full o' magic an' mystery."

"Well, she is a unicorn," Rainbow pointed out.

"I am, at that!" agreed Rarity. "And so you see, Rainbow...the very things that irritate us about one another became the qualities we most admire! Or at least...they *framed* those qualities. They drew our attention to each other."

Applejack nodded. "She was like a puzzle I hadta untangle."

"And *she* was like a lustful force I had to face...and tame."

The earth pony was suddenly in her spouse's face, grinning. "Y'ain't tamed me yet!"

"Perhaps I have," rejoined Rarity, drawing herself up, "and you simply don't recognize the tethers!"

"Well if y'all ask me," piped up a younger voice, "you two are plumb crazy!"

Rarity gasped, and Applejack spun around to find her younger sister peeking out from behind a couch. "Apple Bloom! Were you spyin' on us?"

"Ah we in here first," the child shot back.

"Well, we need the room now," said Applejack. "We were havin' an adult conversation."

"More like a mushy conversation!"

"Apple Bloom, could you find somewhere else to go 'til suppertime? Maybe if y'ask nice, Turnover'll let you run the apple dicer."

"Fine," said the filly. "But you better make it up to me tomorrah!"

Applejack plucked a smaller cowpony hat from a hatrack and placed it on her sister's head. "Ah'll see what ah can do. For now, Miss Rainbow needs mah help, so *skedaddle*."

"Seeya Rarity. Seeya, Rainbow."

The child left, and once the valet had brought in a tea service, he and the cook also departed, leaving the house empty but for the three of them.

"So why all the fooforah just to get together?" asked Rainbow.

"It's what mah sweetheart wants," said Applejack. "An' it's what our staffponies expect. They want to be workin' for big, powerful tycoons who do everythin' up grand, so that's what we give 'em."

"But don't they realize it's only for show?" asked Rainbow.

"Only for show?" exclaimed Rarity. "My dear, it's for our comfort as well! Our formality is an isle of stability in a turbulent business world."

Applejack kissed her. "It's true! Dressmakin's a crazy industry, an' farmin' changes with the weather patterns, as well as the regional economy. We never what curveballs we'll have to deal with next, but at least we know when we're gonna see each other, and how it's gonna happen."

Rainbow tumbled from the chaise and stood up. "But then, why not do what everypony does what they get married, and live together? Why is your marriage so weird?"

"You sound like mah sister," observed Applejack.

Rarity sipped her tea. "In a nutshell, Dash, it's because we're simply too different! We're *unable* to live together. If I had to dwell on a farm, amid dirt, dust, hard labor and the constant whirl of machinery...I'd become a nervous wreck!"

"An' if ah had to live with racks an' rows of pretty lacey dresses an' smocks and shawls and such on all sides, an' shower every single morning, an' watch mah every step while outside so as not to get my hooves untidy," said Applejack, "ah'd go crazy as a punch-drunk weasel."

"You should see the ceremony we go through when *Applejack* comes to visit," said Rarity knowingly. "It's rather different from this one."

"It is?" asked Rainbow.

"We're very understandin' of each other," explained Applejack. "When Rarity comes, ah treat her to the red carpet, fancy dress and crew with all the trappin's, protection from the rain, tea and crumpets, an' generally just treat her like a princess."

"Whereas when my paramour comes to visit," said Rarity, "we greet her with a dingy old green carpet, a mud puddle for her to splash in, and a how do you do chorus."

"Howdy-do," corrected Applejack.

"Yes, precisely. Howdy-do. And then we treat her to dumplings, slaw, potato fries, shepherd's pie, or some other country dish."

"Her staff is very accomodatin'."

Rarity laughed. "Oh, yes, the workers find it all very amusing. I think they truly relish the variety."

"You sayin' we don't?" Applejack gave Rarity a peck on the cheek, and received a noserub in return.

"Not at all," said the unicorn. "A glimpse into your world is the highlight of my week—and in a sense, my life!"

Applejack beamed. "Couldn'ta said it better."

Rainbow frowned. She slurped up all her tea in one gulp and went over to the snogging couple. "So are you two gonna help me out, or what?"

Their eyes turned to Rainbow. "But my dear!" said Rarity. "I thought we *were* helping!"

"Helping? How?"

"By...showin' you how love's done?" said Applejack. "Ah thought that was what ya wanted."

Rainbow's eyes smoldered. "I want to know how to *find* someone! All this—it's great, if you've already got a girlfriend...or a boyfriend." She sat hard on one side of the chaise, nearly tipping it over. "But I've got no one, and I'm not even a Wonderbolt yet."

"But you will be, won't you?" Rarity gushed. "Applejack told me your big news, and it's so exciting! Just think—the announcer calling your name...the fans cheering for you...the glory of fame, and the thrill of knowing that your training is really going to count for something!"

"Yeah," sulked Rainbow. "I'll have a lifetime of thrills, and no pony to share it with."

Applejack gave Rainbow a pat on the back. "Aw, Rainbow, I'm *sure* somethin'll work out! At the very least...you can try it out for a while, an' if it gets too depressin', you can just go back t'cloud kickin'. Then you'll have plenty of memories to share with the stallion of your dreams when you find him!"

Somehow Applejack managed to make everything sound so cut and dried. "You can bet they won't make me captain of the weather team again if I do that," Rainbow pointed out. "Regional says I'm lucky to keep the post, given how long a record sheet I've got. And we're not talking the good kind of records."

"Huh."

"Yes, well..."

"That's what I thought. You don't know what I should do, do you?"

"Well, maybe not, sugarcube. But I still think you'll be happiest if y'go for it. No one ever found happiness by abandonin' their dearest dream."

"Unless they find a better one," retorted Rainbow.

"And have you got something in mind?" asked Rarity.

Rainbow hesitated, recalling her notion of starting her own aerobatics group, but shook her head. "Nope. I've got nothing. And this isn't helping." She headed for the door.

Rarity called after: "Oh please, darling, be reasonable!"

"What's reasonable?" Rainbow snapped. "Living my life for the maximum profits? Are you torn because my choices are between staying here for reliable pay, or going off on a wild, high-stakes adventure and maybe losing it all? Not everything is about money, you know!"

"Now wait a minute, sugar. Who said anythin' about money?"

"Are you kidding? You don't need to say it, AJ. It's all around us. Sweet Apple Acres used to actually be something sweet! Not this industrial circus! You used to be a family business!"

"We're *still* a family bus—"

"Just 'cause you and Mac are in charge? Save it. You're a big business now. Practically faceless. And Carousel Clothing Inc. is even worse."

"Are you scorning us simply because we've chosen to focus on financial success?"

"No! I'm not scorning anyone. You did what you had to do. You've got your bucks in a row, you know just what you want. Big success. Big money. And a weird marriage that somehow works for you. But you've got no idea what's best for me."

"It's true," conceded Rarity. "Applejack and I were lucky enough to know each other from the start. We never had to go out searching for love. And it looks like you'll have to. But Rainbow..."

Rainbow turned back from the door to find them both staring sympathetically.

"We'll always be your friends," said Rarity. "No matter what you think of us, or choose to call us...we'll always be here for you. Please...remember that."

Rainbow felt a lump in her throat. She nodded. "I know."

And she left. This place was getting to her.

#8: FP—Off the Rails

Rainbow shoved the three-part door to the library open all at once, marching in. "Hey Spike? That book you gave me isn't any help. It's all about making relationships work, but there's nothing about *finding* relationships! Hi, Twilight."

Indeed, it was Twilight Sparkle behind the circulation desk—Spike was nowhere to be seen. "Hi, Rainbow! Were you looking for Spike?"

"Eh, not really. Just wanted to return this book. Maybe get a new one." She dropped it onto the desk.

Twilight peeked at the title and her expression became hard to read. Concerned, maybe. "Well...all right." She marked her ledger and levitated the book back into its place, wobbling all the way. "But...what did you have in mind?"

"Eh." Rainbow shrugged. She'd been making enough of an ass out of herself that there wasn't much point keeping secrets now, especially from a good friend like Twilight. "I'm looking for something about...finding a soulmate. Something like, 'How Not to Be Sad and Lonely for the Rest of Your Life.' Got anything like that?"

There was an uneasy pause. "Rainbow," said Twilight cautiously. "Is this for you? Are you worried...about being alone?"

Was it going to be this painful with everypony? "Yeah, Twi. I'm worried. You wanna know why? I got word from the Wonderbolts yesterday."

The unicorn's eyes went wide. "Oh, Rainbow, I'm sorry! They turned you down? And now you're afraid no one will ever love you, if you can't—"

"Jeepers, Twilight, no! They want me! And they sent me the schedule, which is *crazy*, and a letter about how I've got to do nothing but be a Wonderbolt from now on—"

But Rainbow broke off when she saw Twilight's face jerk. "Y—you're in?" she asked. She paused. "You're a Wonderbolt!?"

Uh-oh. She was about to leap the desk and nuzzle Rainbow, or something. "Well not yet! I haven't answered them yet! I'm confused. And scared!"

That hadn't been easy to say. Rainbow probably wouldn't have said it at all if it hadn't been so quick, like ripping off a bandage suddenly.

Twilight came around to nuzzle her anyway, in sympathy. Rainbow didn't mind—it felt reassuring. "You're scared?" the unicorn asked.

"I'm scared I'll lose every single other thing in my life. My friends. My home. My career. My...my freedom."

"But...oh, Rainbow." Twilight stood back and sighed. "Isn't it worth it? I mean..." Her voice became subdued, as if straying into an area she hadn't studied. "What is freedom good for, if the best possible choice comes along...and you can't take it?"

"I don't know if it's the best choice!"

"Then what is?" When Rainbow didn't answer, Twilight continued. "It could be that you put so much stock in freedom...that keeping it is actually tying you down. It's making you *less* free."

Rainbow shook her head. "Look. Do you have any books, or not?"

There was a pause.

"Yes...I think I've got a few that might help." Three smaller books were extracted from the shelves via unicorn magic and fluttered down to Rainbow's bag, where they tucked themselves inside. "But Rainbow...please don't go without telling us. If you do go."

"I wouldn't do that, Twilight."

"If you do join the Wonderbolts—and I think you should—when will you have to leave?"

Rainbow was almost sorry. "The training schedule begins in five days."

"Five days?" Twilight's eyes went wide. "So soon?" She heaved a deep breath. "All right. Five days. I can do this. It's okay."

"Twilight?"

"Rainbow." The librarian hugged her friend. "If you're gone in five days, I'm going to miss you. I'm *really* going to miss you. But you *will* find that special stallion. One way or another, I guarantee it. You're not the kind who gives up, Rainbow. You'd never let loneliness get you down."

Yeah, right. "Isn't that what I'm doing right now? I sure don't feel cheerful."

Twilight assessed her from behind the desk. "Well, you probably *could* use some cheering up."

Rainbow threw up her wings. "So what am I supposed to do? Have Pinkie Pie throw me a party?"

Instead of treating this like the throwaway line it was, Twilight looked inspired. Uh-oh. "You know, that might not be a bad idea. Pinkie hasn't thrown any parties in quite a while."

"Huh? But I was only—"

"You've just had some big news, right? Earth-shaking, tremendous news you've been waiting your entire life for, right?"

"Well I guess, except—"

"Then that's the perfect excuse! Honestly, how could Pinkie *not* throw you a party? She'd be completely remiss in her duties! You've got to tell her! And if you don't, I will!"

This was not what Rainbow had been hoping for. In fact, it was exactly what she'd been hoping to avoid, which was why she'd been taking pains to avoid Pinkie all week. "Aw, Twi, c'mon!"

"No, Rainbow. A party is just what you need. Go and see Pinkie at the cottage. I insist."

"But—I mean—I don't want the attention! And besides, it's just so *weird* there!"

"You think being an openly straight Wonderbolt won't feel weird? You think you won't have to deal with attention? Think of this as practice, Rainbow! If you can't take the party, then maybe you're right. Maybe fame and glory *aren't* your best choice."

Twilight prodded Rainbow to the door with intermittent pokes from her horn. "Cripes, Twilight! You don't have to push—I'm going!"

The unicorn raised her head, and Rainbow noticed a surprisingly amount of weariness on her face. "Sorry, Rainbow," she said. "It's just...this is a lot to take in. I really do care—you know that, right? It's just..." She heaved a heavy sigh. "I have to get back to my research."

This was exasperating. "Fine! Don't let me keep you from whatever the hay's so important. I'll just go see Pinkie and...give up whatever dignity I've got left."

Twilight paused on the staircase back to her study. "And don't you *dare* leave town without saying goodbye," she added.

"Sheesh! I won't!" Rainbow pushed through the door, wondering just what Twilight's problem was. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been driven to so much swearing in one conversation.

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Was that a toy soldier *already* beside the path? It had to be. Rainbow didn't want to look, but she couldn't help herself. It was a pegasus in shining armor, armed with a pie cannon. And no, it wasn't her imagination—the figure smelled like banana cream pie.

The figures were showing up earlier and earlier every time she went to the cottage. At this rate, in a few more years they'd be hurling banana cream pies at visitors' ankles all the way.

Rainbow could have flown, of course, but something like morbid curiosity kept her walking along the path. The closer she got to the cottage, the more numerous the figures were. They weren't just soldiers—many were farmers, while some were quarry workers (propped up against crumbling boulders) or lumberjacks (poised in the act of felling saplings). Soon, little red and white houses began to appear along the path, each with their own little inhabitants.

Rainbow found herself trying to remember a time when Fluttershy wasn't crazy. Pinkie had always been crazy, sure, but Fluttershy? Rainbow seemed to recall that in the old days, she'd been more or less normal. Just really shy. But now?

When Rainbow came to the final stretch, she was met by miniature streets, buildings, fields, roads, vehicles, and ponies of all kinds, all colors, all occupations. It was all fake, of course, and downright dizzying to look at. Rather than trudge through like an inconsiderate monster, Rainbow flew straight to the front door. The cottage, at least, was mostly the same as it had ever been, except for the thick pink curtains on every window. They were drawn now: presumably the residents wanted their privacy. Well, they had plenty of privacy most of the time—they could do without for now. Rainbow knocked four times on the door.

A tiny sliver of the door's top section swung open, revealing Fluttershy's familiar frightened eyes. She was draped in shadow—apparently there wasn't much light in there just now. "Rainbow Dash?" she squeaked.

"Yeah. Good to see you, Fluttershy. Can I come in?"

"Um...um...I guess?" The rest of the door opened a crack. "But we're...kind of in the middle of something."

You're always in the middle of something, Rainbow wanted to retort. "It's kind of important. So Pinkie's here?"

"Yepperoonie!" called Pinkie's voice from some distant place within.

Rainbow slipped inside. There was, indeed, no light but what filtered through the thick pink curtains. The floor was covered with a gigantic mesh of loops and trestles whose purpose Rainbow at first couldn't fathom. But

as an object came hurtling toward her leg, only to miss it narrowly while holding to its track with a familiar rumbling sound, she realized what she was looking at. "It's—this is a toy train, isn't it?"

"It's a *model* train," said Fluttershy proudly, her voice still hushed. "And it has all the features."

"Features?" asked Rainbow, stepping between the loops of track with wide eyes.

"Oh, yes. Features like functional crossing gates, rotary car dumpers, modular water features, bi-directional locomotives...cute little animals in the cute little boxcars..."

"Er..." Rainbow scratched her mane, peering at the various things Fluttershy pointed out. "But don't you have *real* cute little animals around here?"

"That's right!" said Fluttershy. "And they love to help out." With an outstretched wing, she indicated her bunny, Angel, wearing an engineer's cap and overalls, as he pulled the lever to activate a switch as the train barreled through. Gummy the alligator, in a conductor's cap, clamped his jaws onto the caboose and promptly began waving like a flag. A number of chipmunks gathered to unload the cargo as the train pulled smoothly into a station.

"I don't get it," said Rainbow. "What makes the trains go? They don't have anypony pulling them."

"Magic makes them go," said Fluttershy. "We have to get their magical cores recharged every week or so."

"Magic, huh?" Rainbow poked at one of the trains as it passed; it tilted for a moment, but found the rails again. "Pfft. We pegasus ponies don't need magic to go fast. Why should a train?"

"Well, actually," said Fluttershy, "according to Twilight Sparkle, many researchers think that pegasus ponies really use magic to—"

"Twilight? What does she know about pegasi like us? It's not like she ever flew anywhere."

"She does have a balloon," Fluttershy pointed out.

"A balloon? You think flying a balloon is like soaring through clouds, seizing thermal boosts, and daring the wind to get out of your way?"

"I'd rather ride a balloon," confessed Fluttershy.

"Did somepony mention *balloons*?!" The fervent voice of Pinkie Pie shot down the stairs, followed closely by its owner, who pounced into the room with a wide-eyed expression and, indeed, a shock of several balloons wrapped by their ribbons around her foreleg.

Rainbow jumped reflexively to face her. "Pinkie!"

"Rainbow!!" Without hesitation, Pinkie gave Rainbow a violet balloon, which she took awkwardly in her mouth. "I'm so glad you came out to visit! It gets kind of lonely out here, even *with* all our subjects to keep us company."

Rainbow had a bad feeling about this. "Your...subjects?"

Pinkie gestured to the panorama of figures scattered about the room, and drew open a curtain to indicate the even larger crowd outside. "They're everywhere! See?"

Rainbow blinked. "But...they're made of wood."

"Not *all* of them! They're also made of twine, and rubber, and clay, and bones—" She wiggled her forehooves ominously. "—and rabbit fur, and pebbles, and felt—"

"Whatever!" Rainbow shouted. "My point is, they're not real!"

"To be fair," said Fluttershy humbly, "no pony's perfect."

"What do you mean they're not real, Dashie?" Pinkie pressed. "They're made of their stuff, and we're made of ours! We're got bones and fur in us, too!"

"But—they're not living. They don't move!" Rainbow kicked a little clay pony figurine with a hat and plow; the pony and plow went tumbling in different directions.

There was stunned silence for a moment. Then Pinkie chirped: "*That* one moved!"

Rainbow didn't know if Pinkie was being serious or not. Either way, she wanted to sigh. "Because I kicked it!"

"Yep! And you kicked her because she made you angry! Face it, Dashie. Our subjects may not be quite like you or me, but they're as real as we are!"

"And they're so loyal," added Fluttershy, fluttering over to rescue the fallen ploughmare.

"I can't believe this," Rainbow moaned. "You two used to be cool. Fluttershy, you used to seem so wise out here...like you were one with nature or something."

She seemed hurt. "I'm not wise anymore?"

"Beats me! You've made a little imaginary city for yourself, so it's like you don't even *live* in nature anymore! And Pinkie...you were always crazy, but at least you used to be *fun*."

Pinkie was also taking it badly, her eyes watering. Rainbow suddenly realized how much like Gilda she sounded, berating her friends like that. And this wasn't the first time. She'd yelled at AJ and Rarity. She'd even yelled at Twilight. What the hay was she thinking, dreaming she'd be able to woo crowds of thousands? She couldn't even keep from insulting her closest friends.

Rainbow blinked back her own tears. "Hey, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. It's just...Pinkie, ever since you moved in with Fluttershy, we hardly ever see you anymore! I miss you. And now...I might be leaving."

Instantly, Pinkie switched from dejected to distressed. "Leaving?! Dash, you're leaving us?"

Rainbow scuffed a hoof against the floor while another train sped by. "Maybe. Probably. The Wonderbolts sent a letter. They liked my audition. ...They want me."

Pinkie's gasp took her zigzagging into the air, glowing like an erratic rocket. At the height of her gasp, she flung herself toward Rainbow with a release of red hot steam, presumably for a hug. Rainbow dodged.

Pinkie landed instead in the heart of the train system, shattering layers upon layers of track. Figurines and landscape features went flying. Still, she didn't miss a beat as she flipped back to her feet, grinning at Rainbow excitedly. "You DID it!!! RAINBOW!! You're gonna be a Wonderbolt!!"

While Rainbow and Fluttershy watched in horror, Pinkie Pie gamboled around, crushing more of the railroad with each step. "Dashie's gonna be a Wonderboolt!" she sang. "Wonderboolt, Wonderboolt! Ev-e-ry filly and every colt is gonna be left quaaa-king!"

Fluttershy, eyes wide, leapt into the heart of the structure and scrambled to fix the mess Pinkie was making. She recruited a retinue of woodland creatures to help her rejoin the tracks, straighten tipped cattle, and so forth. But Pinkie's reign of destruction continued.

"But Pinkie!" shouted Rainbow. "I'm not even sure if I want to do it! There's so much wrong with me...I don't know if I could handle that kind of life!"

Pinkie turned on a dime, fury in her eyes. "Wrong with you?? WRONG WITH YOU?!?" She stamped her hooves as she answered, crushing more subjects with every step. "There's nothing wrong with you! You're *Rainbow Dash!* You leave rainbow trails when you fly! You've got attitude practically seeping out of your ears and burning icky holes in the floor!" Pinkie kicked a water tower, taking out an entire hamlet. "You're even cool

when you're being lazy. And you know there's tons of ponies in town who look up to you! So don't you even THINK of DREAMING of PRETENDING to THINK of PRETENDING to DREAM of saying no to the Wonderbolts!! Because you are *better* than that!!"

Rainbow's mind was thrown out of her troubles by the rampant destruction she was witnessing. "Pinkie, you're—you're ruining your city! What about all your subjects? What about the trains?!"

"Oh, don't worry," murmured Fluttershy. A train zoomed off a broken track and crashed with a burst of magic before her nose, causing her to jerk back in fear, but she recovered a moment later. "She's just being Pinkiezilla. She does that sometimes."

"They will BOW before the Great and Powerful Pinkie!!" The frenzied earth pony seized a train and whipped it around to knock a stationhouse off its moorings. "When is the last time our subjects paid their TAXES?!?"

"Oh, um..." Fluttershy stammered, looking uneasy. "Not for a month, at least!"

"A *month*?! How can they be safe from wanton destruction if they don't pay their taxes?!" Pinkie picked up a wooden sheep and gnawed off one of its legs, tossing the rest to the floor. "One down, *thirty gazillion to go!!*" Her tail whipped around like a floofy hurricane.

"Oh, no," uttered Fluttershy.

"Oh, YES!" bellowed Pinkiezilla, leaping onto the central station and scattering boxcars everywhere.

"Look, Pinkie...PINKIE!!" Rainbow was seriously disturbed by this spectacle. "I came here because I thought you might want to throw me a party! You know...like you used to??"

Slowly, Pinkie quelled her murderous rampage and turned to face Rainbow, the redness draining from her face. "A...a party?"

"Yeah! For...you know...my being accepted into the Wonderbolts."

Pinkie leapt straight from the epicenter of destruction into Rainbow's personal space, now acting like her old self. "A party with actual other ponies?! Dash, that'd be so much fun!! We should totally *do it!!*"

"Well...yeah! Sure! And I mean...if you wanna run things, I'll just stay out of your way..."

Now Pinkie zipped under the broken rails to lie beside Fluttershy, where she joined her in repairing the devastation. "Oh, that's okay! I know Fluttershy'll be glad to help! Isn't that right?"

Fluttershy looked relieved at the apparent end of Pinkiezilla's reign. "Oh, yes! I'll make some special streamers, and bake up some Carob Kisses, and do anything else you need me for."

Pinkie seized Fluttershy and kissed her hard on the lips. The yellow pegasus flailed, eyes going wide, and then seemed to melt in Pinkie's grasp, surrounded by smoking trains and crushed scenery.

"That's what I like about you," Pinkie breathed, just loud enough for Rainbow to hear. "No matter what mayhem I get into...you're always there for me."

Fluttershy blushed, and Pinkie zipped out from the wreckage again in an instant. "So, how does Sugarcube Corner sound? I miss that old place. How about Cometsday?"

Cometsday was four days away! Rainbow worked out the timing in her head. If the party went well into the night, would she be able to make it to the Wonderbolts' training grounds outside Whinneysburg by the following morning?

What was she saying? Of course she would! She was *Rainbow Dash!* "Uh—sure! Cometsday it is! I know I can count on you!"

Rainbow barely had time to realize she'd made her decision. Pinkie was on her immediately with ideas for the party, making suggestions from all angles, even draping streamers over her for no reason. Fluttershy, meanwhile, was enlisting an army of animals from outdoors to help clean up inside. Apparently, they were accustomed to the intermittent ravages of Pinkiezilla.

And, somehow, so was Fluttershy! Rainbow had never understood what had motivated the gentle pegasus to welcome Pinkie into her home almost two years ago, but now it seemed clear that the wildness and caprice of Pinkie Pie must satisfy a secret need in Fluttershy's heart. Rainbow could see it in the glimpses she caught through the streamers and the train tracks—Fluttershy was humming a tune while cleaning up the mess, as content as Rainbow had ever seen her.

This was ridiculous. If someone as random as Pinkie Pie could find a stable mate to love and look after her no matter what insanity she wrought, surely Rainbow could find someone on the road willing to put up with the celebrity life. Maybe a roadie with a heart of gold...or a pretty little boytoy with a sensible streak. Who could say?

She was gonna have hundreds of thousands of fans, after all! And here she was, worried that not even *one* of them would have what it took to keep up with Rainbow's lifestyle?

Hah. Anyone worthy of her in the first place would have more than enough energy for that! And if he needed a boost, Rainbow could lend him a little of her own.

The more she reflected, the more she decided this party was a great idea, after all. Rainbow was going to become a Wonderbolt!! What was there not to celebrate?!

#9: DT—Flying Sparks

Cometsday. Dusk. Already, noise and light were spilling from Sugarcube Corner, and ponies in the streets were being drawn as by a magnet to this throwback to the days when Pinkie Pie lived in town and threw parties twice a week. A huge picture of Rainbow's face, in a Wonderbolt mask, was plastered to the front window. But Rainbow wasn't there. She was outside the Ponyville library, landing just as Spike, sporting his tuxedo jacket, hurried out.

"Rainbow!" he exclaimed. "What're you doing here? You'll be late for your own party!"

"Well," she pointed out, "it's not like the party *really* begins until *I* get there." It felt good to have her old swagger back. "Besides, Twilight wanted to meet me here for some reason."

Spike stared. "She did? She hasn't been seeing *anyone*!"

"Huh?"

"I mean, she's been like this for months, but all of a sudden it got way worse! She's been locked in her room for almost four days straight, and she won't even let *me* in!"

"Really? What's she doing in there?"

"Research! It's the same secret spell she started working on months ago, one that's supposed to be so difficult up until now only *alicorns* could cast it! But lately she's been acting like she's running out of time." He shook his head. "I just don't get it."

"Me neither. Is she even coming to the party?"

Spike took on a sulky demeanor. "Beats me. Probably not—I bet that's why she wanted to meet you. Just gonna say a quick goodbye and get back to work."

Rainbow sighed. Oh, well. She'd known she was going to have to summon up a bunch of goodbyes before the night was through—she just hoped this first one wouldn't be the hardest. "Well, guess I'd better go see her. I'll meet you at the party, Spike."

"Yep. I'll let 'em know they aren't having any fun yet."

"Not without yours truly!" winked Rainbow. Spike waved and hustled up the street, and Rainbow ventured into the great tree for what might be the last time.

It was dark inside, and quiet. No patrons. No sign of life. "Twilight?" she called.

There was a clatter of movement from upstairs. "Rainbow?" came Twilight's panicked voice.

"Yeah, it's me. I'm just on my way to the party. You know, the one that was your idea."

Hooves clomped from above, and then Twilight appeared on the staircase. "You're not dressed up."

Rainbow shook her mane. "Do I *ever* dress up, if I can help it?"

Twilight chuckled. "Well, you're going to have to start, soon."

Huh? Oh, right. "Ah, a flight's suit's different. It's on a whole 'nother level."

Twilight exhaled nervously. "It is indeed. Rainbow...I know the party's starting, and you don't want to be late, but...we should talk."

"Yeah, I know. You want to say goodbye and then get back to whatever you're doing."

"No—Rainbow—please." The unicorn came down to ground level and cleared a bench strewn with books so she could sit. To her surprise, Rainbow felt herself starting to tremble as she took a seat on the floor.

"So now you wanna talk," she said. "Now that I'm on my way out. Splinters, Twilight. I hardly ever see you anymore. It was bad enough when Pinkie left town, bad enough when Rarity bought all those buildings and went corporate. Bad enough when Applejack brought in all that staff and suddenly she was busy all day. But where did you go? I come to the library and see Spike behind the desk—my friend Twilight's up being a recluse in her room! For months! And *now* you wanna talk?"

"Rainbow—you have to understand—"

But it was all slipping out, at last. "I'm sick of my friends fading away! What happened to what we had? Weren't we supposed to be a gang forever? The Elements of Harmony? The six best friends Ponyville ever had? And what happens? Rarity marries Applejack, Pinkie hooks up with Fluttershy, and for all I know, you're married to your magic. You want to know what, Twilight? Once, I would've looked at that Wonderbolt schedule, with its non-stop training and appearances and no vacation time, and I would've said: You're crazy! You may be the Wonderbolts, but if I don't get to spend at least a few weeks a year in Ponyville—with my *friends*—then you can go ahead and find somepony else for the job!! I would've said that, Twilight!"

"Rainbow, please! It doesn't need to—"

"But now?? Now that things are like they are? Who gives a fig?! Who cares?! I may as well pack up all the nothing I've got, leave town, and never look back! I may as well slip away, just like the rest of you. Only being who I am, I'll do it with flash. I'm not gonna be half here, half gone, making you wonder if I'm still around. I'm gonna be *gone*, like a shot, and you'll only see my face in the Equestria Daily. Because that's how I do things—when I'm driven to them. And the rest of you can just see if you miss me."

"Rainbow." Twilight was in tears now.

Rainbow bit her tongue. She hadn't meant to do that! She hadn't meant to let out all her frustrations in a big rant before the party... not when it would spoil her last meaningful moment with Twilight. Rainbow found herself wanting to cry, too. "I'm sorry," she mumbled.

Twilight's voice was cracked. "I have to show you something."

Rainbow stood back, puzzled. "Show me?"

Twilight rose from her seat, blinking away her tears. "You've probably been wondering what I've been working on so hard these last few months."

So this was about that? "Yeah? Yeah, I think everyone has."

"It's a spell. A very difficult spell, one Princess Celestia learned from her mother. She only uses it now and then, for friends in need. But when...when...when Pinkie threw you that big...coming out party..." Twilight paused, the tears returning. "...I started asking the princess about it. And asking. And asking." She hid her eyes, her voice hoarse. "And four months ago...she finally agreed to teach it to me."

Rainbow was utterly lost. "My coming out party? What does that have to do with...?"

"So she called me in to Canterlot, and she showed me the essentials, and left me with scrolls and books and exercises to do...and I did them. I read the original source material. I studied all the pieces until I knew them backwards and forwards. And these last few days, I finally put them together into a framework I know I can cast. I had to scramble, and I had to ignore poor Spike, but I got it done. I knew I had to get it done by tonight."

"Tonight? You mean you're gonna show me?"

Twilight heaved a tired, wispy breath. "Yes," she said, tears gleaming at the edges of her eyes. "Yes, Rainbow. I'm going to show you. Because it's all been...for you."

This was starting to freak Rainbow out. "For me?!"

Twilight nodded. She took another deep breath. And another. Rainbow could hear the pain in it. The fear. "What...what's going on, Twilight?"

"I just...I'm so scared," she whispered. She turned away. The darkness of the library hid her face, and Rainbow found herself scared, too. She

couldn't look away, though. Her friend Twilight was counting on her...for something.

A ribbon of white seared through the air. Twilight's horn was glowing...glowing in two different colors now...sparkling. Another ribbon joined the first, this one baby blue. Sprinkles of white and gold filled the upper air. They settled over the two ribbons as they intertwined, and while Twilight closed her eyes, Rainbow kept hers wide open.

Now there were magical pulses on all sides of Twilight, and the ribbons curled to meet them on either sides. The sprinkles danced above them, spurred by the vibrations of the magical pulse. They settled around Twilight, and the ribbons hugged closer, and the pulses grew tighter, wrapping themselves around the unicorn. Her whole body was engulfed in magic until she was jerking, half floating in the force of it, her horn now a sizzling bright white, her eyes tightly closed. The ribbons somehow found their way under her coat. Rainbow winced at the sight of it. They bulged under the guidance of the shimmering pulses, and with that, Twilight's body began to change. Her waist expanded. Her shoulders widened, her girth drew in tighter. Higher up, her crest stretched backwards, and her chin straightened, as did the bridge of her nose. Muscles grew subtly all over her body. Rainbow felt herself shivering, too. Was the spell taking her in?

But no. As the sparkles finally faded and the magical pulse subsided, Rainbow realized it wasn't the magic that was making her shake. Her body had recognized what was happening before her mind had. Twilight Sparkle had become a stallion!

The implications rushed like hormones through Rainbow's brain. *All for her?* Had to finish by tonight? "Twilight..."

Twilight was standing in a pool of light, the last thing to fade. Head raised, she—no, he—opened his eyes and raised a hoof. It returned gently to the floor; the head turned back. Rainbow couldn't say a word, nor could she look away.

"It worked, didn't it?"

Was that Twilight's voice? It was still fairly high-pitched, still precise and well-rounded, but now there was an all-different timbre to it. It was a male

voice, and its owner had an unmistakably male body. Rainbow swallowed. Visions of her future did aerial stunts in her mind. "Yeah, it worked. Twilight? You...changed yourself?"

Twilight looked directly at Rainbow, freezing all her thoughts. "It's not permanent," he told her. "It lasts one day. And I won't be able to cast it again for a week. But that's enough...isn't it, Rainbow? Please...please. Tell me that's enough."

Rainbow stepped forward. She swallowed. She didn't know what to say. "Enough...enough for what, Twilight?"

Those amethyst eyes were locked on her. "Rainbow...you've won your dream. You're about to leave Ponyville...about to go off on the biggest adventure of your life. And all I want to say is...Take me with you! I want to go too, Rainbow!"

Rainbow fell to her knees. She was so awash in emotion she could barely identify it as happiness. But that's what it was. "And...and to think...I was going to settle for some groupie, or roadie somewhere...but now..."

Twilight's eyes sparkled as he drew up with a smile. "...Now?"

"...I get to hook up with the most powerful unicorn in Equestria! And a friend of mine, to boot!"

"Only fitting for Equestria's most illustrious speedster! So you'll do it?" asked Twilight, tears glazing over his eyes. "You find me...attractive?"

Rainbow looked over the crevices and features of that new male body, but she couldn't even focus. "I...it's not even important if I like your body, Twilight. I'm sure it's fine, and we'll have plenty of time to find out, but...right now I'm just bowled over by the fact you did this at all! Four *months* of research...and pestering the princess before that...all for *me*!?"

The purple stallion smiled. "Rainbow, you have to realize...when you came out, it nearly broke my heart. I'd admired you so much, almost from the day I met you. You're amazing. A daredevil. A heartbreaker! I may not know much about love, but you? You won me over in ten seconds flat."

"So you went this far for me, huh? And you'll follow me through thick and thin, to Wonderbolt shows and photo shoots and parades and interviews?"

"Absolutely! I'll even be open about our arrangement, if you want me to. I have nothing to hide."

"What if the press starts giving Celestia grief over her favorite student going showbiz and changing sex just to please her Wonderbolt lover?"

"Believe me, Celestia knows," laughed Twilight. "We have her blessing."

Rainbow felt herself rising, and found she was fluttering her wings subconsciously. "Well, you've done it, Twilight. You've made me lighter than air. I've always liked you, and now I love you! I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you—" Rainbow broke off to chuckle over a thought.

"What is it?"

She let herself settle back to the floor. "Something that occurred to me a few days ago. Our friends...they've paired up into their own weird worlds and gone larger than life. Rarity and Applejack...they've built little cities around themselves, surrounded themselves with employees...but they treat them as if they're toys. And Pinkie and Fluttershy...they've got a *fake* city, with tons and tons of toys...but they treat them like they were *ponies*. It's kind of the opposite!"

"I hadn't thought of that," acknowledged Twilight. "And us?"

"Well, we've got the chance to go really big," said Rainbow with a wink. "Big crowds, big cities...no two ways about it, we really *will* be larger than life."

"Huh! And yet," Twilight pointed out, "we'll be doing it while having fun. Entertaining ponies! When you get right down to it, we'll be the toys!"

Rainbow gaped, but then laughed. "You're right!" She shook her head, chuckling. "We just can't get away from those toys, can we?"

Not if we want to be larger than life," replied Twilight.

Rainbow felt her chest swelling and her heart pounding. She glanced out the window and noticed a flicker of light. "Oh gosh, I'd better get going. They'll be expecting me."

"You mean *we'd* better get going!" Twilight walked toward the door, opening it magically. "If I'm going to be leaving town suddenly, the least I can do is offer an explanation!"

Rainbow smiled hugely, picturing the impression Twilight would make. She extended her wings. "Twilight Sparkle, would you care to be my date for the party tonight?"

The well-formed stallion favored her with a graceful bow. "Nothing would please me more, Ms. Rainbow Dash."

They walked through the door into the night, letting themselves gravitate among with everyone else toward the festivities at the cake shop. The night air, slightly permeated with the scent of roman candles, was enchanting.

"So what'll happen to Spike?" asked Rainbow. "Poor guy'll miss you."

~~"I know!" said Twilight. "He's getting completely shafted in all this! He's already been feeling vulnerable for the last few months while I was researching the spell and couldn't spend much time with him...and now he's going to lose me completely! He'll be an eleven-year-old in sole charge of an entire library who's just lost the only parent figure he's ever had. Add that to the fact that he's spent his whole life without a role model of his own species, and he's gonna need a looooooot of therapy. I figure he'll probably wind up abandoning the library to Derpy and spend his nights after that in a bed in Rarity's factory, alone and adrift."~~

~~"So basically, screw him?" summarized Rainbow.~~

~~"Oddly enough, that's just what Celestia said," agreed Twilight with a grin.~~

"True, it'll be a shock for him. But he still has plenty of friends in Canterlot, and I think he's been missing them recently. I've arranged with my parents to take him back in, and Princess Celestia's offered to buy them all Wonderbolts season tickets."

Rainbow grinned. "Sounds like a plan." Another thought crossed her mind. "You know, if you're gonna be my lover on the road, you're gonna have to find some way to keep up. We Wonderbolts can travel pretty fast, you know."

Twilight swished his tail against Rainbow's haunch. "I figured you'd carry me," he teased.

Rainbow laughed. "You know, that might actually be the best way! You'd have to help, of course. I can't fly too fast while lugging a full grown stallion."

Twilight cocked his head . "How do you know? Have you ever tried?"

"Well, no but—" Rainbow gave another, bigger laugh. "I just figure. If I'm gonna be carrying one of Equestria's premier magicians around, I oughta get at least a *little* help."

Twilight leaned over to give Rainbow an intoxicating kiss. "Oh, you will, Rainbow. Believe me—while I'm in your grasp? Sparks. Will. Fly."

And if the timbre of their ensuing kiss was any indication, that was no exaggeration.

CHAPTER 4

THE HARM IN HARMONY

or

BIRDS OF A FEATHER FLOCK TOGETHER

#10: RT—Redefining Aristocracy

The main room was bubbling with the babbling of dozens of ponies, which to Pinkie's mind made the perfect backdrop for a little back-hallway zaniness. "...All right. First you say a word, and then I say a word, and then you say *another* word, and I say another word, and then you say another—"

"Pinkie!!"

Apparently Twilight didn't quite grasp the rules yet. "That sounded like a whole sentence, silly! You can't start out with an entire sentence! Then I don't even get a turn!"

Twilight glanced momentarily toward the hallway's exit. "So...we keep going until we reach the end of a sentence?"

"Yep!" chirped Pinkie.

"And...what exactly are we hoping to accomplish?"

Such a typical Twilight question. "Fuuunn!" Pinkie admonished, splaying her legs a bit.

"So you're saying...that it's fun to generate random sentences?"

Pinkie felt her mane puff out. "It's not random! It depends on *both* of us! It's like how a spirit board works, only without the board!"

"And without spirits," added Twilight.

"*Most* of the time," Pinkie replied. "But I could tell you stories!! Honestly, it's only half random, at most!

"So it's stochastic," said Twilight.

How did Twilight always manage to bring these big words into everything?
"Stow-what's-kick?"

"Stochastic!" Twilight started to walk and lecture in that funny way she did sometimes. "A 'stochastic' process is one that depends on a random variable. It may unfold according to the rules of science and logic, but it has randomness at its core!"

Pinkie crept alongside with long steps. "Sounds like you and me!"

Twilight gave her a stern look. "I am *not* the hard crunchy coating to your chewy bubblegum center," she insisted.

"No, of course not, silly! That's Jackie! But you've gotta admit, you are always trying to squeeeeeze as much sense out of innocent little random things as you possibly can!" She pantomimed wringing the neck of an inexplicable concept.

Twilight glanced out the door again, and then turned back to Pinkie and stamped. "Fine. Let's do this. I start with a word?"

Pinkie nodded. Hooray!

"Probability," Twilight said.

"Cupcakes!" exclaimed Pinkie.

Twilight narrowed her eyes. "Probability cupcakes?"

"That's *two* words, Twilight!"

"But...what are probability cupcakes??"

"How should I know? They must be waveform-flavored or something. It doesn't matter!"

Twilight stared, but continued. "Are."

"Cupcakes!" said Pinkie, smiling.

Twilight blinked. "...That..." she tried.

"Cupcakes!" said Pinkie. This was just too easy!

Twilight glared, her eyes growing red. "Are you going to say anything but 'cupcakes'?!"

Pinkie shrugged. "I say whatever comes into my head!"

"But it doesn't make any sense! What good is this game if the sentences don't make any sense?!"

"That sounds like a challenge!" Pinkie leapt in place, hair bobbing wildly. "Are you challenging my word?"

Twilight's lip curled. "...I guess?"

Newbies! Pinkie cleared her throat and recited cheerfully: "'Probability cupcakes are cupcakes that cupcakes of a more normal persuasion have never learned to tolerate, perhaps because they tend to collapse spontaneously while baking in the oven!' Now you just try and tell me that doesn't make any sense!"

Twilight stood, mouth agape. "It--that--all right, I admit that does make a certain amount of sense. Does this mean you win?"

Pinkie laughed. "Oh, silly. There's no winning in this game! ...But yes." With that, she zipped off, sensing that the moment was right for a comic exit. Twilight was stuck in the back hallway until showtime, but the party was finally starting to swing into gear! Pinkie had party games to play! Mayhem to sow! Inhibitions to dissolve! Balloons to—

"*Pinkie Pie!!*"

Again? Pinkie skidded to a halt in mid-bounce, plopping to the floor. This time it was Rarity yelling at her, and the unicorn, clad in an ultramarine sheath evening gown, looked upset.

"What's the matter, Rarity?"

"I hate to be rude, Pinkie, but have you forgotten the pretext by which we got you invited to this affair? I know you have punch boiling in your veins, but you're here to *cater*! Not to cavort about!"

"I know," Pinkie mourned. "And we whipped up a whole bunch of neat stuff to serve! But I'm not in my natural element if I'm cooped up behind a serving table! Can't I just stuff it all into a big piñata and give everyone a giant ladle or something?"

"As...amusing as that thought is, I'm afraid not. This is no casual shindig, Pinkie—this is Princess Celestia's *birthday*! It demands propriety!"

"We could fill the piñata with propriety!" suggested Pinkie. "Unless that's an abstract concept, or something. But even then!"

Rarity's horn glowed, and Pinkie found herself being tugged toward her assigned place by her red bow tie cravat. "Back to the table, Pinkie."

Pinkie sighed. She'd tried! She trudged back to her table and listlessly stirred her apple geode soup with a long ladle she'd much rather have been using to whack a piñata. "Hey Rarity?" she asked. "Why do rich and fancy ponies always make having fun so *difficult*?"

"Why, Pinkie!" exclaimed the socialite. "Do you imagine that success ought to be all fun and games? I am sorry to inform you, dear, that rubbing fetlocks in high society is hard work! Otherwise, what would it *mean*!?"

"What would what mean?" asked Pinkie. "Success?"

"Precisely! If we didn't have to labor for our reputations, what would be the point of having them? It's all very well to have boundless fun at a friendly

party at home, Pinkie...but in high society, every ounce of fun must be *earned!*"

This was actually starting to make sense. "Oh! Maybe *that's* why I have so much trouble with parties like these!" Pinkie exclaimed. "Earning something sounds a lot like give and take. But when it comes to me and fun, I prefer to *give and get!*" To illustrate her point, Pinkie dished out a bowl of soup to the fellow caterer just arriving at the table next to hers, a diminutive blue mare who smiled in surprise and offered Pinkie a slice of fresh focaccia in return.

Rarity seemed charmed by this exchange. "Perhaps you're right," she conceded. "Perhaps we shouldn't have to earn our popularity. But Pinkie, it's simply too enjoyable *not* to! Twilight and I are always up for a challenge, after all!"

"Well, you've certainly done a good job so far! I mean, you've done cast parties on Bridlewalk...that bash for Sapphire Shores' sister...the Manehattan casino circuit...and now Celestia's birthday!"

Rarity chuckled. "Oh, but this was easy, Pinkie! Twilight goes back a *long* way with the princess, as you know. She had only to ask for an invitation!"

"Even so!" pressed Pinkie. "It's funny to think how I used to want to go to all the biggest and best parties in Equestria, but now you and Twilight are getting to live my dream! I mean, *Twilight!* When I met her, she couldn't tell a party from a parsnip! I actually checked! I gave her a parsnip and said, 'Hey, do you want this delicious party?' and she just sort of stared at me so I knew she'd fallen for it!"

Rarity laughed her high little laugh. "You aren't jealous, are you, Pinkie? You know I care a great deal for our friendship—I'd hate to let success come between us."

Pinkie winked cutely. "No worries! I *used* to wish I could go to all those parties, but when the Grand Galloping Gala was such a letdown, I realized that it's not how big or famous a party is that makes it great. It's how many cookies there are!! And a jillion other things too, of course, but no, Rarity, I'm not jealous. I can make great parties happen on my own."

Rarity tossed her mane. "Indeed! I'm very relieved to hear that, Pinkie. Still, dropping your name for caterer was the least I could do!" She glanced toward the back hallway, where Twilight was beckoning. "Oh—it looks like we're on! Enjoy the show, Pinkie!"

"Later!"

As Rarity hurried off, Pinkie turned her attention to the yellow-haired blue earth pony who'd given her the focaccia. "So you're the savory caterer, huh?"

The little mare let out a single chuckle. "Beg your pardon?"

Pinkie pointed to their respective collections of dishes, laid out along the long tables. "You're the savory caterer, and I'm the sweet one! That's why they wanted two of us! I'm Pinkie Pie." She offered a hoof.

"Juniper." The meek caterer met Pinkie's hoof with her own, completing the gesture. "It's true, I was told I wouldn't have to worry about desserts. I guess they're a specialty of yours?"

Pinkie slurped up a generous ladleful of geode soup. "You could say that! I do a lot with apples these days, though!"

Juniper craned her neck to examine Pinkie's table. "So I see! Looks like you've got apple tarts, apple spice cakes...apple crumble, apple cobbler..."

"Pear cobbler, actually! But yep, it's mostly apples." She lifted a boiled, peeled apple from the soup pot. "I invented a way to suck the core out of an apple and stuff it with candy! So I call them 'geodes' and they're really popular. Go on, try yours!"

As dinner wasn't for a while, the two caterers sampled each other's wares, having little else to do in the meantime. "Amazing," said Juniper. "How do you core the apples without cutting them open?"

Pinkie's mane bounced. "It's a secret!"

The blue mare smiled shyly. "Well then, tell me this—who was that unicorn you were talking to earlier?"

"Huh? Oh, that's Rarity Starspinner! But I knew her back when she was just Rarity. We went to school together in Hoofington, and now we both live in Ponyville!"

"Is she a performer of some kind?"

"Kinda!" Pinkie waved a hoof equivocally. "She's more of a social big shot. Oh hey—you're about to find out!" Sure enough, the royal herald had appeared and sparking silver flecks filled the upper air, garnering everypony's attention.

"Fillies and gentlecolts," cried the herald. "I'm having a *splendid* time! Can you say the same?!"

Pinkie and Juniper locked smiles for a moment as they joined the room of partygoers in clomping their forehooves against the floor.

The herald gestured toward the back hallway. "I give you...*Rarity Starspinner and Twilight Sparkle!*"

While the applause continued, a flourish of harp music sounded from the hallway, accompanied by lavishly flowing pink and purple ribbons of light. In stepped Rarity, her evening gown now embellished with a striped mulberry kimono, some sections of which were sheer enough to let the purple show through. She wore a light blue obi and a diamond-shaped silver pin, and through her obi was thrust a parasol depicting wispy clouds on an idyllic day. She raised a hoof and waved daintily to the crowd, lips curled in a tart smile.

She was followed by Twilight, whose orange tunic and yellow-tangerine grass skirt were accented by her own parasol, which depicted a twilight sun framed by searing parhelia above a dark landscape. Twilight's wave and smile were far more innocent—the contrast made the crowd laugh, Pinkie included.

"My friends!!" announced Twilight to the room at large. The two of them were not on a stage or even a platform—they were right there in the room with everyone else, which Pinkie knew was how they always operated.

"Friends and neighbors! It's great to be back in Canterlot—the city where I grew up!"

The cheers had died down, but this gave them a new lease. Rarity didn't wait for silence. She lowered herself to all fours and lifted her head high. "Why, yes! Twilight uses that friends and neighbors line at every show, folks, but tonight she may actually *recognize* a few!"

"I do, actually!" Twilight turned from face to face. "There's Mr. Shimmerseal, the telescope maker!" An old silver stallion acknowledged the crowd's light applause. "And Captain Ragnar of the Guard—I used to live up the block from him, in fact, and let me tell you—he treated his family like one of his regiments!" The tawny off-duty guard stallion laughed along with the crowd.

"Well, then the neighbors are covered!" crooned Rarity. "As for friends—believe me, Twilight Sparkle knows a thing or two about friendship."

"Well, I did write a dissertation on the subject," admitted Twilight with mock-humility, earning more laughs.

"She certainly did!" agreed Rarity. "And Twilight was no slouch at putting her ideas into practice, either! Her dissertation was quite a hefty volume—I believe her typical tactic was to drop it on somepony's head, and invite them in for aspirin while they recovered!"

"You have to admit," said Twilight, "I did refine my methods over time."

"True enough," her partner conceded. "Once she got to know somepony, she would tailor her book selection to their personality. Our friend Rainbow Dash, for example—a speed racer—might find herself conked unconscious by a copy of *The Fast and the Flurrious!*"

Of course, Pinkie knew Twilight had never dropped a book on anypony's head in her life—not deliberately, anyway! But she laughed with the crowd just the same.

Twilight now turned to the face the screened balcony from which the room knew Princess Celestia was watching. "Well, if anypony's to blame, it's the one who assigned my dissertation in the first place—none other than

Princess Celestia!" Now the crowd's hoots subsided to sounds of reverence.

"Ah yes, Celestia!" replied Rarity. "Guardian of the Realm!"

"Keeper of the Day," added Twilight, starting to twirl her parasol.

"Disperser of Discord!" cried Rarity, twirling hers as well.

"Unifier of the Thirty-Two Queendoms!" praised Twilight.

"Thirty-eight!" corrected Rarity.

"Well, they all got unified anyway, so let's just call it an even forty," suggested Twilight, earning more chuckles. "And let's not forget her most important title of all...Oldest Troll!"

Rarity gasped, mortified. "*Senior* Troll!"

"Senior anything, really," said Twilight.

"You do have a point," Rarity conceded. "And of course, Ruler of Equestria and Princess of the Sun."

"I knew I was forgetting something!" acknowledged Twilight. "We are gathered here today to honor Celestia for her eight zillionth birthday—may she see zillions and zillions more!"

Rarity frowned. "You realize, of course, Twilight, that 'zillion' is not a proper number?"

Twilight nodded solemnly. "That's just how transcendent she is! She was done with ordinary numbers ages ago. As I understand it, she once celebrated her seven thousand, nine hundred ninety-ninth birthday for a million years straight!"

Rarity feigned astonishment, her parasol flying back. "What are the odds?"

"I could tell you," replied Twilight, "but then I'd have to whack you with a math book."

The patter continued for a while, and then the show turned to fashion. Rarity made a disparaging remark about Twilight's skirt, and Twilight responded with fake indignation. Rarity magnanimously offered to upgrade her partner's ensemble, and Twilight reluctantly accepted, sitting down for her public 'redressal and upbraiding'.

As the act continued, Pinkie found herself amazed at how far Twilight had come. Just two years ago, the purple bookworm had been inept in front of any crowd without notes to read from. Now, thanks to Rarity, she was practically in her element while performing burlesque! It just went to show how much difference the love of a dedicated partner could make.

A fawning Rarity Starspinner stuffed Twilight into petticoats, gowns, sashes, vests, and anything else she could justify. Finally, Twilight began to fight back. "You know, if this really is all about appearances," she pointed out, "there's no rule the clothes have to be real!"

"Why, Twilight, whatever do you mean?"

"I mean, Rarity, that with a little effort, a talented unicorn could conjure up garments from pure magic, like this!" A periwinkle shawl appeared glowing in midair, clearly illusory, and descended around Rarity's neck and shoulders.

"Are you joking, Twilight? I can't wear *this*! It isn't..." Rarity slipped out and waved a hoof straight through the floating shawl. "It isn't *substantial* enough!"

"And since when has fashion been about substance?" countered Twilight.

"Since *when*?!" snorted and angry Rarity. "*Every three years*, I'll have you know! Plus a leap year every seven fashion cycles!"

Come to think of it, Pinkie was also impressed at how Rarity, once uptight, had grown to the point she was able to make fun of her own profession like this. Of course, Pinkie had helped them develop the comedic side of their act, which made her proud. But the whole gang had blossomed like she wouldn't have *believed* ever since they'd used the Elements of Harmony a second time to defeat Discord. Sure, Rainbow was no longer obsessing

over her training, but to be perfectly honest, the Wonderbolts had never really been a feasible dream for her, given that they only recruited to fill openings and had a waiting list twenty ponies long. With the time she was saving, Dash had become a much better weather pony and companion for Fluttershy. And Fluttershy, for her part, was learning medical techniques from Zecora, and was such a good veterinarian now that she helped sick and injured animals from as far away as Trottingham! As for Pinkie and Jackie...well. Pinkie grinned at the thought of all those cruller trees. Really, did anything more need to be said?

The show was careening to its finale now, both unicorns swaddled in at last five layers of clothing, real and illusory, and Rarity had just added a pointed wizard's cap to Twilight's ensemble. "Isn't she so *chic*?" she was asking the audience. "Isn't she just the most adorable magical prodigy you've ever laid eyes on??"

Twilight rose to her feet, accessories clattering to the floor. "I think they've had about as much of us as they can take," she surmised. "How about we close with a poem!"

"An excellent idea, Twilight! Something classical and evocative, perhaps?"

"Oorrrr I could do a limerick!" suggested Twilight. The crowd laughed anew.

"Really," deadpanned Rarity. "Well, it had better not begin, 'There once was a pony called Rarity.'"

"Er..." hemmed Twilight. "What if I recite it backwards?"

Rarity facehoofed and flung off half her clothes in a gesture of pique. "Never mind! Just recite it!"

"Right!" Twilight cleared her throat and faced the crowd:

*"There once was a pony called Rarity
Renowned for the strength of her charity.
There is no defense
To her fashion sense
Except to embrace the hilarity!"*

As the crowd laughed, Twilight threw them her wizard's hat and said,
"Thank you! Thank you, friends and neighbors!"

"And thank *you*, Twilight, for that lovely tribute. Good night, everypony!"
The two performers waved their goodbyes, took their bows, and slipped back into the hallway whence they'd come. Again the air was filled with flowing ribbons and sparkles, and the herald took the floor again.

"Twilight Sparkle and Rarity Starspinner, fillies and gentlecolts! And now...!
The court of Equestria will be most obliged if you would all rise, and join us...in a moment of song."

Pinkie whipped her head left and right. Was it time? Was it time?? She spotted a retinue of armored guards entering through a doorway beneath the balcony, and behind them, in full shining majesty, was the princess herself, adorned in her royal sandals and brooch and, in place of her crown, a colorful pointed birthday hat! It was time!

Celestia nodded to her subjects on all sides as they cheered her entrance into the already bustling palace ballroom. Sweeping silver lights dazzled the room and balloons fell from above. A note on a kazoo rang out, and seconds later, the whole assemblage, Pinkie included, erupted into song...

"Happy birthday to you!

"Happy birthday to you!

"Happy birthday dear Celly..." (Well, a lot of the ponies sang her full name, but Pinkie didn't know why when it was so obvious that "Celly" scanned better!)

"Happy birthday toooo yooooooooou!"

Pinkie made sure to end at exactly the same moment as the last other pony singing, so that no one would be left singing alone. But then began the follow-up verse that only actually got sung occasionally, so Pinkie was surprised when participation was so enthusiastic throughout the room:

"How oooollld aaare you?

"How oooollld aaare you?

"How oooollld aaare yoooouuu?

"How oooollld aaare you?"

In response, Celestia tossed her polychromatic mane, gave a wicked grin, and announced, "I'll *never* tell!!" At which the crowd erupted into cheers and boos.

As Celestia seated herself before the cake (a towering original creation Pinkie and Jackie had stayed up well into the night to finish), Pinkie got a familiar vague feeling that she ought to be paying musical royalties to someone, somewhere. But the presence of actual royalty quickly overshadowed it. Everyone wanted to get close to the princess, to pay their respects! Pinkie, having already met her on several occasions, remained in place, bouncing up and down, but Juniper zipped off to get a quick word in, if she could.

It wasn't two minutes before the lights came on and Celestia, standing where Rarity and Twilight had only minutes before, raised her horn and addressed the room:

"My dear friends...my dear, dear friends...." The princess shook her head as if to clear it of tears that by all rights she shouldn't be crying, after having soooo many birthdays for practice! Then again, maybe that was *why* she was crying!

"Thank you so much for coming...By tradition, I am sometimes personally associated with Equestria. Because of this fact, today is being celebrated in town halls, village squares, and private residences throughout our realm. Each locale has its own traditional celebration—from the rodeos and marches of distant Palamine to the fireworks and endless troughs of Manehattan. But nowhere—nowhere are they celebrating like us! Because you, my wonderful friends, have actually come to celebrate my birthday with *me*—and you can't know how much I appreciate it! I feel so, so lucky to be so beloved." The ruler of Equestria bowed her head in humility.

Then she raised it suddenly. "And can you believe this cake?!?" She gestured to the cake with its massive rings of red, pink and white, the rim of each layer cut with pink candy-coated cookies and wafer-thin apple slices, and the room broke out once again in applause. Pinkie felt herself blushing and grinning simultaneously. She took a bow behind her table, though she doubted anypony but Juniper saw her do it.

But she was seen soon enough! Celestia declared that dinner had begun, and at last it was time for Pinkie and Juniper to start dishing out their comestible delights! So Pinkie got to work. Most guests went to Juniper's table first, but enough elected to start with dessert that Pinkie had her hooves full for the next twenty minutes—a blur of hustling, cutting, spooning, chatting, and delivering her treasury of puddings, cakes, and pastries.

At last, things began to slow down. Something twinged inside Pinkie's brain as a gray, dark-haired mare with a very staid demeanor walked up for an apple brioche. This earthy pony looked a lot like Pinkie's sister Inkie Pie...but as she might have been if Pinkie had never brought joy into her life. This wasn't her sister, but hadn't Pinkie seen her somewhere before?

Oh! Right! "I remember you now!" Pinkie blurted. "You're one of those musicians from the Grand Galloping Gala! You helped me play the Pokey Pony on your cello!"

"Double bass," the earth pony corrected sternly.

"Mmm, nope, I'm pretty sure it's a cello!"

A flinty pair of purple eyes glared across the serving table. "Don't you suppose I can be trusted to know what instrument I play?"

Huh. This pony might look like her sister, but she sure seemed like a Meanie McMeanerpants. Though why the family hadn't changed their name when they'd stopped wearing pants, Pinkie had no idea. "Well I *guess* you probably forgot, because you don't *bow* the double bass! You pluck it, like this!" She mimed plucking the strings of a contrabass, managing to reproduce the tones passably by kicking the nearest table leg in sync with her motions. Pinkie was rather proud of that until a tower of stuffed apples collapsed into an open-faced apple pie.

The haughty musician eyed the resulting mess with an expression that spoke volumes. Pinkie grinned sheepishly and offered an apple-smeared apple to the gray pony.

Sneering, the musician snatched the apple in the crook of her foreleg. "One most certainly *can* bow the double bass," she hissed. "And must, when producing chamber music!"

"Is that so?" asked Pinkie. "Well, I think you're forgetting one thing." She leaned over the table and sang staccato into the musician's face: "There's always room for C-E-L-L...O!"

The musician scoffed and left, leaving Pinkie with that weird urge to pay someone royalties again.

She had other guests to serve, but all the while, her inner gears were turning. What if Pinkie had never experienced her life-changing epiphany as a filly? Her family would never have become the most cheerful rock farmers in the Hoofington metro, and Inkie might have grown up to be as grumpy as that musician. Maybe an orchestral player could afford an attitude like that, but a sculptor like Inkie who specialized in balancing rocks on top of other rocks probably couldn't. Pinkie quietly despaired for what her poor sister might have become, if it hadn't been for that sonic rainboom...

The sonic rainboom. It had led not just to her cutie mark, but to those of all her closest friends, as well. That *couldn't* have been a coincidence! Pinkie grappled with the implications—their destinies really must be intertwined. Which explained not only how they all happened to be perfectly suited to wield Elements of Harmony, but how they were all romantically suited for each other as well. Two unicorns who loved high society, two pegasi who loved the outdoors, two earth ponies who loved baking...It was as if the Elements were watching out for their emotional stability...making sure they didn't end up alone and bitter, like that double cellist....

Something clicked in Pinkie's head. She shuddered. She *really* shuddered. "Ohh nnnooOooOooOoo!!!" screamed Pinkie as she felt herself jackhammering along the table, spinning from side to back to rump to belly without any control, upsetting all her desserts along the way. Apparently she was about to get run over by her own train of thought! At least, that was the only sane interpretation she could make. The one time this had happened before, it had signified a major, painful mental and emotional breakthrough on Twilight's part. A revelation! Pinkie could only assume, as she rattled to the very end of the long table and collapsed onto the floor

amid the wreckage of her sweets, that another frightening revelation was on its way.

Stunned ponies stood all around her, staring and muttering and nosing her to see if she was okay. Juniper was trying to get her to stand. Before she could, Pinkie looked up to see Princess Celestia approaching. A feeling of peace cut through the fear. There was a sliver of silver white, and the terrifying touch of Celestia's horn—and then calm. Pinkie rose slowly, the spasms gone, and gazed into the eyes of her princess.

"Pinkie Pie," said the ruler of Equestria. "Are you all right?"

Pinkie shook herself, spraying frosting and crumbles on those nearest to her. "I just had a doozy," she uttered.

"A doozy of a seizure, Pinkie?"

She shook her head. "Nope. Just a doozy!" She lowered her voice. "Somepony's gonna realize something big and scary."

The onlookers murmured and the princess looked apprehensive. "I wonder if Luna was right," she muttered. She bent to whisper in Pinkie's ear. "Do you have any clue what this might be about?"

Pinkie whispered right back. "About the Elements of Harmony. And what they've done!"

Celestia looked no calmer than before. "After the party...can you stay behind? And bring your friends? We should talk."

That wasn't what Pinkie had wanted to hear, but she nodded. "Sorry about all the desserts. I guess I kinda gave a new meaning to 'apple turnover'."

But with a swoosh and flourish of Celestia's head, the mess was cleared, and what desserts remained were restored to order. "It's all right, Pinkie. We still have the cake! Speaking of which..."

Celestia strode through the confused crowd toward the gigantic cake, drawing attention away from Pinkie and her disaster. "Well, my friends, it seems we've had a mishap and lost most of our desserts." She laughed

gaily—in the face of a laugh like that, who could possibly stay dismayed?
"All the more important for us to cut the cake! But first!"

A team of pegasus ponies in kitchen uniforms fluttered over the massive confection and swiftly inserted a multitude of candles into the top. The one in the center was largest, the others successively smaller in rings around it, as if to indicate that Princess Celestia's age was as indeterminate as the size of the universe. Suddenly, a flash of orange and red soared over the top—it was Philomena, Pinkie realized, and she'd used her flaming feathers to light all the candles at once! The crowd was hushed but for gasps and oohs.

"It's time for me to make a wish!" announced the princess. "What should I wish for?"

There was a miniscule pause, and then everypony was shouting suggestions, trying to drown out the noise of their neighbors. "Free trade with the griffons!" someone yelled. "Stronger sky chariots!" bellowed someone else. "More wishes!" called a smart alek teenager. "More desserts!" shouted someone nearby. Pinkie added her own voice to the cacophony: "Chocolate rain!!"

The princess drew in so much breath that the flames almost went out from her *inhalation*. There was a pregnant pause, and then she exhaled, extinguishing the entire conflagration in an artistic swirl of fire. The assemblage clomped and cheered, and the princess, smiling a secret smile, stepped forward to make the first cut using her horn, in accordance with tradition.

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The two unicorns were in a changing room off the back hallway. Pinkie found them layered in far too many mismatched clothes, laughing and dressing each other with even more! She didn't get the idea they were in there for *changing*. Canoodling was more like it!

"*There* you are! I've been looking everywhere! The party's over and the princesses want to talk to us!"

Both unicorns looked over, eyes wide. "*Pinkie!*" shrieked Rarity. "You're interrupting a very private moment!"

"I am? That's weird!" mused Pinkie. "I thought having *fewer* clothes was sexier. Anyway, we've gotta go see them pronto!"

Twilight struggled to escape a green denim jacket. "What's this about, Pinkie?"

"I'm not sure, but I think it's about the Elements of Harmony!"

Now Twilight's eyes were huge and panic-stricken. "Are you serious? We've got to use them *again*?! Who's the villain this time?"

"Nopony! It's the Elements themselves! Come on!"

Pinkie seized the duo by the sleeve of a sweater they were somehow both wearing, leaving them to hurriedly shed their garments as she dragged them through the corridors.

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They sat in a room wider than it was deep, lit only by tall, multicolored candles in the corners. Mobiles of moons, planets and asteroids dangled from the high ceiling. Across the formidable table of stone and lead sat Princess Celestia, her expression far more troubled than a birthday girl's ought to be. To her right sat the deep indigo form of Princess Luna.

"How do you like my meeting room?" asked the younger alicorn. Her voice was meek, but tinged with determination to overcome that fact. "Nice and atmospheric, isn't it? I designed it myself." She looked up to where a mobile of wobbly comets chased each other around an evanescent nebula.

"It's lovely, your majesty," said Twilight with a perfunctory bow, "but why are we here? Is something wrong with the Elements of Harmony?"

Celestia cleared her throat, her horn lending a green-white glow to the somber candlelight. "First of all, I want to stress that there is no danger to any of you. We are here only to talk."

"Well, yes," said Rarity, still straightening her tangled hair, "but to talk about what?"

"About my doozy!" exclaimed Pinkie. "You missed it, but I got all herky-jerky during dinner!"

Twilight shot her a startled glance. "You mean like just before we encountered that hydra, and I realized that your...premonitory abilities don't have to make sense in order to be worth acknowledging?"

"Exactly." Pinkie leveled a suspicious gaze at the princesses. "But I think I may have an idea what this is about!"

"You do? That's good," said Luna.

Pinkie was a little surprised to hear it. "Meaning what?"

Luna leaned forward and shivered, apparently with excitement. "You'll have to forgive me if I'm out of the loop. But Pinkie Pie...is it true that you've become a unit with the keeper of Honesty, Applejack?"

Pinkie nodded enthusiastically. "I love her to pieces! Or more accurately, into one big piece that's the same size and shape as she was before!"

Luna gritted her teeth and turned to the unicorns. "And you...your burlesque routine isn't just an act, is it?"

"Not at all," affirmed Rarity. "We're head over hocks in love with one another."

Celestia spoke up. "It surprised me, I admit, when Twilight gave me the news that you were together! I mean no offense to you, Rarity, but I always expected you would court aristocracy!"

Rarity sniffed. "Why tie myself down to some boorish aristocrat when I can instead...*redefine* aristocracy with my dearest friend?"

"I tend to keep her grounded," said Twilight.

"Precisely. Twilight may have been raised in...privileged circumstances, but she certainly knows humility, and Celestia kn—your majesty knows I need a dose of that from time to time."

"And is that what holds you together?" asked an eager Luna.

"Well, not *merely* that," laughed Rarity. "Let's just say that...while I may know how to keep a divine abode, Twilight Sparkle keeps a heavenly bed!"

Twilight blushed. "I know how to make her happy," she admitted.

Luna blushed as well, to Pinkie's surprise. "And your friends, Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy?"

"Oh, they go back a *long, long* way," reminisced Rarity. "Rainbow has always felt a soft spot for Fluttershy...defending her honor and the like. Yet it wasn't until our run-in with Discord two years ago that they truly became close."

Luna turned abruptly to Pinkie. "And this is what bothers you, isn't it? It all seems too perfect."

Pinkie nodded hesitantly. "Yeah, I guess! But then again, can anything ever be *too* perfect? I mean, they say you can have too much of a good thing, but the way I see it, as soon as you have too much, it turns into a *bad* thing, doesn't it? And some things never seem to turn bad no matter *how* much you have! Like cookies! And parties! And those little chewy candies with the red and green wrappers so that they look like strawberries, only they're crunchy on the outside so they're actually harder than strawberries, except they're also gooey in the middle, so they're actually *softer* than strawberries! But even if there are things you can't have too much of, there are other things—like chocolate milk rain—that are just *too good to be true!* And I guess...I guess that's how it feels with the six of us. Like it's just worked out too perfectly...too perfectly to be true."

"Tell them, sister," said Luna.

Rarity and Twilight glanced at each other, then froze. Princess Celestia didn't look much more comfortable. Yet after a brief hesitation, she spoke.

"Very well. There is a reason the Elements of Harmony have the name they do. Unlike other magical artifacts, they thrive on interpersonal connection—that which makes us feel stronger than the sum of our parts. Luna and I felt it ourselves, when we wielded them."

"We were closer then," said Luna nostalgically.

Celestia nodded. "For those decades, we set our natural differences aside."

"Yet, we reasoned that if we continued to depend on the Elements to maintain our personal harmony, it would...stunt us," continued Luna. "We feared what they would do to us over centuries. So...we broke our links to them, and locked them away."

Celestia turned, teary-eyed, to her sister. "The greatest mistake we ever made."

"We can't play *what if*," shrugged Luna. "I'm back, and I'm healing, and...we just don't know what the alternative was."

"Wait," interjected Twilight. "Are you saying that...the reason we fell in love...all of us...is that the Elements *made* us?"

"Only your hearts know the answer to that, Twilight Sparkle," said Celestia at the same moment that Luna said, "Yes, that's what we're saying."

The three friends exchanged frightened glances.

Pinkie would have found it hard to describe what she was feeling. It was the opposite of twitterpation—a frenzied sort of panic that everything she'd been doing with Jackie for the past year or two was wrong. A huge waste of time. She felt like a gigantic invisible screwdriver was futzing around inside her head. She couldn't control her breathing.

"But that's...that absurd!!" objected Rarity. "Twilight and I were the best of friends almost immediately! Surely we would still have met and bonded and eventually fallen in love were it not for the Elements of Harmony!"

Celestia lowered her head. "I wish I could tell you it were so," she said.

"You should have told us!!" yelled Twilight.

"It seemed so benign," Celestia whispered. "After all, who needs to be warned against happiness and harmony?"

"But...but..." Pinkie stammered. "But what about...what about who we really are?! What about our real selves, not our enchanted, harmonied-up selves? What if we were never meant to fall in love??"

"Meant by whom?" asked Celestia. It was a frightening question to be asked by the mistress of the sun and possibly the most powerful being in the world. What could you say?

"Offer to release them," said Luna.

Celestia looked to her sadly.

"Release us?" asked Twilight, stunned. "Can...can you do that?"

"It is possible," Celestia admitted. "I would only need to find replacements that the Elements would consider acceptable."

"But..." said Rarity.

"It's right," said Luna. "No one should go through life not knowing if their love is true."

"Integrity," whispered Twilight, eyeing the table.

"Equestria would mourn the loss of such noble guardians," Celestia told them. "But she has other noble ponies within her borders. As much as it saddens me...my sister is right. The choice is yours."

Pinkie sat in silence. Her heart was speeding up. Was this the doozy? This had to be the doozy. The fact that her time as the Element of Laughter might soon be over...?

No. That wasn't it. It was the possibility that her love for Jackie wasn't real. *That* was what terrified her. That was what made her want to faint right there at the table.

Well, if that was what she wanted, what was stopping her? Live free. Pinkie passed out, her face hitting stone.

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Pinkie's memories reacted to the cold, sudden feelings of stone and shock. They sifted like lightning bugs through her filters until the one she needed was on top...and it lingered, absorbing the sense of stone and changing it to euphoria....and sunlight.

It was the greatest high Pinkie could remember ever having. And it wasn't from cake or chocolate or helium or fermented berries or anything else like that. It was from talking! The sun was burning, the sugars in her body were churning, and she'd been talking to Applejack for *over seven hours*.

"...so I guess I had the idea that there was something magic about not cutting or taping the sheets together, just folding and sticking them into each other, like if you cut them with scissors all the origami magic would come pouring out and suddenly you couldn't make anything with them anymore, or maybe you could, but it'd be a whole different kind of thing, and it wouldn't be good for hanging from mobiles anymore, just putting in pop-up books, and those don't work if they're closed. But then I thought, what if I could harness the magic when it gets spilled? Wouldn't that just be amazing?! So there was a period when I would sneak into the classroom after school was out and make tiny little nips with the scissors in all the origami sculptures, and try to catch the energy in baking tins and honeycombs and flypaper and conch shells..."

Thumple-tumble! Down went another treeful of apples into their buckets. "Ya don't say," said Applejack.

"I *do* say!" exclaimed Pinkie. "And here's why...!"

For Pinkie, life was about constantly juggling powerful desires against each other, something her friends didn't always seem to realize. One of these was the desire to talk, endlessly, to her heart's content. Pinkie believed in

a lot of big things—that the world's ultimate destiny was to be transformed into a gigantic neverending party; that with enough work, anything could be made to taste and feel good; that everyone and everything in the world was worth making friends with if you had the time and patience to do it...and she fervently believed that if she was allowed to talk long enough, and freely enough, she would eventually arrive at the cosmic truth at the heart of reality. Even if it took a million years to get there, it was worth trying, because the closer you got, the better you felt....

"...and she told us that no matter how hard you try, you can't fold the same piece of paper more than seven times! Well, needless to say, I thought she was CAH-RAAY-ZEE. I mean, does paper run out of foldability? Does it get stiff and hard like a cured saddle or something? Does it go on strike and say, 'I've been folded, spindled and mutilated, but this is just one fold too far!'?? NO! Paper doesn't do any of that! So what's to keep me from just folding and unfolding the same sheet as many times as I want? At least, that's what I thought at the time. But then it turned out she meant you couldn't fold it seven times in a row, *without* unfolding..."

At times, the piston of desire just pushed too hard and snapped Pinkie's tethers, and she threw herself into indulging one of her desires without reservation. This certainly wasn't the first time she'd thrown restraint to the wind and blabbed on for hours without pause, but she was coming to realize there was something special about it just the same. And she knew what it was: This was the first time she'd actually had somepony listen to her!!

Not that Applejack was hanging on her every word, or even paying close attention...but she really was listening! She was setting out buckets, kicking apples from the trees, and nodding now and then, or grunting in agreement, and even interjecting every so often with "Huh!" or "Sure!" or "Well, ah s'pose." More essentially, she hadn't told Pinkie to shut up, even once!

In fact, through her interminable rambling, Pinkie even thought she spied Applejack sporting a furtive smile now and then!

"...a really, really *huge* sheet of paper, and dragged it home, and I got all these candles and set them out and made this huge ceremony out of it, and I got my sister Blinky to help me make the really big folds, and she did it

like it was a church service or something with her eyes almost closed, and we were five folds in and I totally thought we were gonna get to at *least* eight, but then our mom caught us, and I guess she thought we were part of some crazy horrible paper cult, because she *shrieked* and kicked out all our candles and tore up our paper, and sent us to bed without any rock candy, and that night I started to wonder—maybe the paper somehow *knew* I was about to fold it eight times, and sent mom to stop me..."

"Is that a fact?" asked Applejack, that little smile growing on her lips as she spun around to smack a tree.

"It's a memory!!" answered Pinkie. "So I guess it's a fact if I trust my memory...and if *you* trust it. And you do trust my memory, don't you, Applejack? You know I wouldn't lie to you, and if I wouldn't lie to you, why would I lie to myself?!"

"Sugar, far as I kin reckon, you ain't got a lyin' bone in your body. Only reservation I got is that you've got so many amazin' thoughts in that head o' yours, it'd be a wonder if'n they didn't get tangled up every so often."

"I *know*!! And that's why I have to just lie down sometimes, and let the sun beam down on me, and let all my thoughts settle down, until they stop swirling and they're all where they belong...." And that's what she was doing now. Pinkie rested on her back, her hooves all in the air, her mane bunched up like a pillow. "I think I can feel my thoughts falling," she said. "There's one falling out of my right back leg, but I can't quite get it out, maybe if I shake...ooh, I think one landed on my tongue!"

Applejack stepped away from her overflowing buckets and stood over Pinkie, hearty amusement coloring her features. "This tongue right here?" she asked.

"Well of course, silly, how many tongues do you think I have? If I had more than one, it'd be creepy. I'd probably start talking with them all at once, and then no one could make any sense of what I was saying, not even you! And you're the best listener I think I ever met, Applejack, especially when you're bucking apples, because it's like you never get bored, and you never get annoyed, and it's just like, you're making me strong enough to go on thinking and talking, but if I had more than one tongue..."

"You still got that thought on yer tongue, sugarcube?"

"I bet!! I think I managed to make it bigger and now it's stuck in deep and I'll *never* get it out, unless I—"

"I'll jes' take care o' that for ya," said Applejack. And she leaned over. And Pinkie's eyes went wide—what was Applejack doing? Was she going to bite the extra thought right off Pinkie's tongue? What if she missed? What if she accidentally—"

Ohhhh, ohhh, ohhhh, OHHHH, OHHHHH, so this was what it was like to be *KISSED!!*

Pinkie shuddered and shut her eyes and floundered in the double warmth of the sun and...and her friend, her best friend, her brand new super best friend *forever!* She flung out her forelegs and hugged Applejack around the knees, and she didn't let the kiss end for a long, long time. When it was done, the words were gone from her. She didn't feel the need to talk endlessly anymore, and somehow she didn't mind.

"You kissed me!" Pinkie rasped.

Applejack was smiling, her hat askew. "Just my way of thankin' you for makin' mah workday a pleasant one!"

Pinkie felt a laugh welling up from deep in her gut. "Are we gonna be *fillyfriends* now?! Cause I've never had a real fillyfriend before, and it'd be so exciting, and I already know you and everything, and you're such a great listener, and I could throw us a party, and we could bake so many pies, and—'

"Hush now, sugar." Applejack's lips were inches from her own. "I'm game if you are, but you don't wanna spoil the surprise."

"The surprise?" whispered Pinkie, rapt on the ground.

"There's always gonna be surprises. That's what'll keep us fresh!" With a wink, Applejack hauled her laden cart away.

Pinkie paused for an amazed moment, and then pinwheeled around, still on her back, so that she could watch the farmer go.

That's when she knew things would be fresh forever.

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But that's also when she woke up, head swaddled in blankets in the chariot back to Ponyville, and cried out. Had Jackie's kiss really been heartfelt? Or had it just been the handiwork of a citrine apple in a golden necklace, locked away out of sight?

She had to know.

#11: DF—The Finer Points of Weather

Weather Journal:

The clouds are shifting again. By now, I think I know what that means...they're teasing me, their holes crisscrossing until they find a neat little overlapping place where the sun can play Peek-a-Boo! Then, maybe the hole will grow and grow until the whole yard is engulfed in the warmth of summer.

For now, it's around sixty-five degrees, with occasional zephyrs. I don't mind the zephyrs. I love them! Sometimes, if they keep coming back, I like to give them names. There's a zephyr that keeps rushing up on me from the southwest, as though it's a little animal pouncing its mother! I call it Clive. Clive is so much fun when I've just come outside. Then there's one that likes to start low and swirl around and around until it zips away into the sky. I call that one Priscilla! I enjoy Priscilla most when I'm sitting in the tree swing, but she's always good for a little excitement.

The humidity is lower than yesterday. I'm guessing it's down to three dewdrops, which is still enough to be comfortable so long as it's not too hot. If it does get warmer, I hope Rainbow remembers to bring up the humidity accordingly. But if there's a lag, it may be even better—it could feel like an intermittent little tugging feeling of dryness, reminding me where I am—and then soothing, wonderful relief!

If she forgets the humidity entirely, I'll forgive her, of course. We're all learning as we go through life, after all.

Fluttershy looked up from her journal at the sudden break of light. She was right—the layers of clouds had finally found a hole, and sun was breaking through. It was better than she'd imagined it: the sunlight was so pure, and its aim was perfect! Rainbow was getting better and better at this every day.

"Wow, Fluttershy!" came Twilight Sparkle's voice, startling her into zipping under the table with a squeal. "Oh—I'm sorry! I didn't mean to scare you. I was just saying your yard looks amazing, especially with you and your table in the middle of that bright sunbeam."

It wasn't just Twilight. Pinkie Pie, Applejack and Rarity had all come to visit, too. Distracted as she'd been, Fluttershy hadn't noticed the sound of their hooves on the soft loam. She crept out from her hiding place and smiled bashfully. "It's because of the light," she confided. "Rainbow's giving me some quality time right now." She smiled upward, her face aglow with the sun's rays.

"She is?" queried Applejack. "Ah don' see her."

"Oh, she's up there," explained Fluttershy. "This is how our quality time works. I come out in the yard, and Rainbow makes it heavenly for me! She plays with the weather. She's gotten so good at controlling wind currents, temperature, humidity...and of course, the clouds."

Fluttershy spread her wings to indicate the glory of the stratus clouds, and everypony gazed along with her. It was silent and perfect.

"So while she's doing that," she continued, "I write in my weather journal. Sometimes I just write about the weather Rainbow gives me, like I was doing now. Sometimes I write poetry, instead! Or I make pretty pictures...and sometimes I just do chores like feeding the animals and enjoy the day. It's amazing to know that during our quality time, my whole home and the sky above it is like one big cradle, just for me!"

Rarity was nodding; Fluttershy had already discussed this with her in depth. Applejack, though, seemed skeptical. "Don't y'all actually spend any time together? Like, really together?"

Fluttershy smiled all too broadly. "Oh, yes. Sometimes we work together at making the breeze as perfect as we can. We fly against the wind in unison...and then, once it's just right, we lie in hammocks together and listen to the animals chattering, and soak in the wonderful breeze...and take pride in the fact that it's our doing." She felt herself blushing by the time she was done talking, and the realization made her blush further.

"That's beautiful, Fluttershy," said Twilight. "But I hope it's not distracting her from weather duty for the town."

"Nnnope!" called Rainbow's voice. A gust of warm wind struck them in advance of Rainbow's descent; apparently she'd heard them talking. "If anything, I'm better than ever!" Rainbow landed before the visitors, her mane billowing almost like Celestia's, only it was wind, not magic, that kept it going. "I used to count on other members of the team to handle all the little niggly stuff. Air pressure...ionization..."

"Well, subtle ain't exactly your watchword," remarked Applejack.

"It didn't use to be!" answered Rainbow. "But ever since Fluttershy and I became mates, I've been learning all kinds of tricks to keep her happy!"

"It's true," Fluttershy confirmed. "She's been learning all the finer points of weather. Just for me!"

Rainbow folded her wings and lifted her head proudly. "Yep! All that stuff I thought I'd never have time for. And I may have learned it for her, but it's paying off in my work! Did you hear? I won the Central Equestria Weather Technician of the Month award a few weeks back! And Ponyville shot up to fourth place on Wingding Magazine's Best Climate list!"

"Well, congrats," said Applejack, tucking a foreleg in appreciation.

"That's wonderful, Rainbow!" exclaimed Rarity.

For the first time, then, Pinkie spoke—and her tone was uncharacteristically somber. "Yeah, that's great that you've been winning awards and getting snug-as-a-bug-in-a-rug with Fluttershy—even if you haven't actually been touching—but we've got news!"

This didn't sound good. Still, Fluttershy had to hope. "Good news?" she asked.

Pinkie shook her head.

"Humdrum news?" Fluttershy tried, her stance a little lower.

Again, Pinkie indicated in the negative.

Fluttershy sank to the ground. "Bad news?" she breathed.

Pinkie gave a grim little nod. "I dunno how to say this...so...maybe we should do charades or Hangmare or something like that until you guess it!" When Applejack's hoof thumped her side, though, she continued, "Or maybe I should just say it. Princess Luna thinks it's because of the Elements of Harmony that we all fell in love."

Wait...what?

"What do you mean?" asked Rainbow.

"I was just thinking about how perfect it was that we all paired up like we did, just like how *your* sonic rainboom gave us all our cutie marks! I was so excited I trembled all over the dessert table just thinking about it! That's when I knew it was a doozy, and I told Celestia, and Luna made her fess up."

Rainbow rared back in astonishment. "Are you saying...?"

"I'm *saying*," said Pinkie Pie, "that it was their magic that made us get so close! We bonded with the Elements, so they bonded us! Together! They put thoughts in our head and feelings in our hearts!"

"But..." Fluttershy looked around uneasily. "But I love Rainbow. I really do."

Rainbow looked between Fluttershy and Pinkie briskly, her face hardening into denial. "What are you talking about, Pinkie? I love Fluttershy because she's worth it! She's my oldest friend, and...and her heart's so strong...and I'll never let anyone tear us apart! Never!"

Applejack stepped up. "Sorry, Rainbow, but ya gotta face facts. Y'all didn't used to be in love, did ya? That only started after we used the Elements a second time. And did ya hear what Pinkie said? The princesses *admitted* to it! Your love's not natural!"

Rainbow blinked a few times and looked at Fluttershy uncertainly, and it nearly broke Fluttershy's heart. She fell to her haunches, unable to speak.

"Sorry, Fluttershy," said Applejack. "It threw me for a loop, too. Ah stayed up all last night with my granny, cryin' it out over cider."

"And I told Mr. and Mrs. Cake," said Pinkie weakly, "and they were great. They helped me get through the pain...made sure I know that I really *am* loved...by so many ponies...and by Gummy..."

"I'm not so sure about Gummy," interjected Twilight, but Rarity shushed her.

"Ah wish we could jus' get through this together, like we do ev'rythin' else," said Applejack, hesitantly nuzzling Pinkie. "But ah don't know what I could say that you'd...be able t'take at face value."

Pinkie's head sank, her mane getting less floofy. Fluttershy heaved a deep sigh and stared at her love. She felt the tears welling.

"It feels so real," she murmured.

"It totally does," said Rainbow.

Twilight seemed to be struggling now. "Feelings are like that, guys. Sometimes we feel what our bodies...or external influences like magic...tell us to feel, and we tell ourselves it's genuine. We find reasons, and we embrace them..." Now she was looking longingly at Rarity. "And we swear they couldn't have come from anyplace from our true hearts, because that's where we *want* them to come from. ...But they don't," she finished quietly. "Sometimes they just don't."

"Yeah? And sometimes they do!" countered Rainbow, fluttering just off the ground.

"But how can you tell?" implored Rarity.

Rainbow opened her mouth for a retort, but instead she just hovered there silently, her tail undulating.

Fluttershy flew over and gave her a hug. Rainbow didn't protest; the two of them flipped and twirled about in midair, and kissed, and closed their eyes to the others.

"Flutter," moaned Rainbow. "I don't want to say goodbye..."

Fluttershy drew on one of her seldom-used reserves of inner strength. "It isn't really goodbye," she said. "We'll still be friends."

"But...you're so special to me..."

There wasn't anything more to say. Fluttershy cuddled her mate, and the two of them landed. The others were looking grim.

"Princess Celestia is looking for potential replacements to wield the Elements," said Twilight. "She's willing to unbind us if we ask her to."

Fluttershy had seen that coming, but it still felt like a boulder in her stomach. "...Should we?"

"We've gotta," said Applejack. "We owe it to ourselves for our feelin's to be genuine articles."

"Sad to say, I find I agree," said Twilight. "I've always believed in intellectual integrity...I have to believe in emotional integrity as well."

"I...but..." said Rainbow.

Fluttershy walked up to Twilight. "But Twilight. The princess placed her trust in us to be the keepers of the Elements. Is it really right for us to give that up, just to know...our true feelings?"

Twilight nodded sadly. "I think we have to."

Applejack walked up and nodded. "We gotta be honest with ourselves. Because if we can't trust our own feelin's...who can we trust?"

Fluttershy bowed her head. "Okay," she conceded. "I'm willing to do this."

She felt Rainbow's wings around her in a heartbeat; Rainbow embraced Fluttershy like a fallen tent in a storm, only with warmth, and will. "I'm gonna miss this so much," the weather pegasus whispered.

"I know," Fluttershy answered. "I will, too."

After that, no one wanted to leave. So they stayed—they spent the night sprawled on the loveseat, on the cushions and chairs, even in Fluttershy's bed, drinking ginseng tea and trying to comfort each other. No one knew quite what to say or who to say it to, so they said what came to mind, and played with the raccoons, and twittered to the birds in their birdhouses, and everyone cried at one point or another.

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Fluttershy awoke. It was night. The crickets were chirping too loudly.

She knew well that crickets altered the rate of their call based on the temperature. In the past, she'd used that fact to *gauge* the temperature. Since she and Rainbow had started sharing quality time, however, she'd learned to gauge temperature by feel alone. It was fifty degrees outside, and the crickets were chirping as if it were over sixty. She wondered why.

Maybe it was for the same reason her heart was racing. Fifteen days had passed since Celestia's birthday—fifteen days of second guessing, fear, and emotional chaos. After that first long night, they'd reluctantly sent word to Princess Celestia that they were, in fact, resigning the mantle of the Elements of Harmony. Celestia had written back in acknowledgement: She would begin searching for their replacements.

For the next week, Fluttershy hadn't spent a single night alone. Rainbow had stayed, clinging, and then she'd gone to be alone. Pinkie had slept in Fluttershy's chicken coop and taken breakfast with the birds each morning. Applejack had cooked meals in Fluttershy's kitchen for anypony who wanted the food. Even Rarity and Twilight had slept over twice, staring at Luna's sky and babbling aimlessly over tea and crumpets.

The town had talked. Fluttershy knew they had, even though she'd hardly left her home since getting the news. How could they not talk, with members of all three pony species sharing the same house—even the same bed for all they knew? Some townsfolk must have suspected perversion, but Fluttershy could live with that stigma. What she couldn't live without...was love.

At last, her friends had moved on, leaving Fluttershy to sleep alone. But then, she was never really alone, was she? Clive and Priscilla might be gone, but the world was always filled with creatures, many of which were her friends! Fluttershy had little doubt the crickets outside knew somehow this was an important night.

Did they somehow realize that Celestia had finally summoned them the palace, and that tonight would be Fluttershy's last as the Element of Kindness? Probably not. But surely they realized that something was happening, and were chirping in anticipation.

And of course, there was Angel Bunny. Her little guardian Angel was always there, making sure she came to no harm. Fluttershy saw him there on his little rug, as awake as she was. Watching her.

"Oh, Angel." She slipped out of bed and went to lie beside him. "What do you think, Angel? Will I still be in love with Rainbow tomorrow?"

The rabbit twitched his nose. He pointed to the open window.

Fluttershy turned to face it. It wasn't hard to know what he was thinking. "I should go to her."

He nodded briskly.

Fluttershy poised herself at the windowsill, gathering her nerves. She glanced at her rabbit companion once more, then leapt into the night.

It was cold, but her heart warmed her from within. Fluttershy wasn't a pegasus of the heights by any stretch, so it felt strange to just ascend and ascend, but she had to. Rainbow's home, which normally drifted hither and yon over Ponyville, now hung in the sky over her cottage, as it had for the last fifteen days. Fluttershy relished the aches in her muscles as she rose. She was a pegasus of the zephyrs, not the heights, but she missed those zephyrs dearly—she wanted to bring them down again.

As the walls of the cloud dwelling took shape in her sight, Fluttershy started to wonder how she would wake Rainbow, or whether she would simply sit by her side and watch her longingly, one last time. But it was moot; as she rose before the window, she found her blue lover already there, staring.

Rainbow gasped and screamed. Fluttershy screamed in reflex. Then Rainbow sprang through the window and hovered in the air, just feet away. Gaping.

"...Fluttershy?"

Fluttershy could only breathe and keep herself from falling.

Rainbow, too, seemed to be having an uncharacteristically hard time getting out her words. "Di—did you come to...say goodbye?"

Fluttershy nodded, eyes large.

Rainbow shook. She stared at the zenith of the sky, clear with stars. "It isn't right," she said.

"I know," agreed Fluttershy.

"If our love was...if it was really supposed to happen...then it'll still be there," Rainbow rationalized.

Fluttershy nodded over and over, squinting away tears. There was a long pause. It was still chilly, but no wind blew.

"You know what?" said Rainbow. "I don't care. Screw it! Screw what was meant to be! Screw what's really in our hearts. Let's not take the chance."

Fluttershy opened her eyes carefully and tried to focus. She flapped her wings and hung there, wracked with feelings, her body fighting to stay warm.

"Okay," she whispered, and flew into Rainbow's embrace. They locked their legs together.

Somehow, they managed to get back into the house. Collapsing to the soft floor, they gave themselves to each other.

Truth was the lens by which confusion came clear; truth was beauty. But if the truth was that they weren't meant to love each other, Rainbow was

simply too loyal to learn it. And Fluttershy was just too kind to break her lover's heart.

Let confusion reign. There was beauty in confusion, anyway. And in each other.

#12: AP—*Delectable Delights*

The trek was silent. Normally, Pinkie would be filling the air with songs, jokes, and stochastic verbiage, but after the last fortnight, there was nothing left to be said. They were grim, determined, hopeful, solemn. Rarity's mane, for once, had been combed stiff and straight, but what really shocked Pinkie was that Jackie, for the first time in memory, had left her hat at home.

At least they weren't headed to the ruined palace in the Everfree Forest. They'd accepted the mantle of the Elements there, and had feared it might be where they'd have to part from them. Instead, Celestia's letter had directed them to a brick-paved terrace adjoining the royal palace, accessible only by a winding road up Canterlot Mountain.

As the terrace came into view, they saw a retinue of stalwart uniformed guards in two rows flanking a broad space where the red and goldenrod bricks were laid in a gigantic five-pointed star. In the middle of that space stood six ponies milling, and behind them Celestia. They turned to regard the newcomers as they arrived, reverence in their eyes.

The six consisted of two ponies of each race, three male and three female, including a familiar face or two. Pinkie was gearing herself up to greet them with her usual enthusiasm when Celestia leapt over the group and surged to stand before the newcomers.

Twilight was first to bow, and the rest followed suit. "Your Majesty," they murmured, Pinkie among them. This felt like no time for levity.

"My friends," said the princess of the sun, sadness in her voice. "Why have only four of you come? Where are Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy?"

Twilight spoke on their behalf. "They told us this morning that they'd changed their minds, Princess. Their love for each other is too great for them to risk losing it. They wish to remain in the service of the Elements."

Celestia took this in, eyes large, her undulating mane seemingly at odds with her feelings. "I wish you had written to tell me."

Twilight bowed again and shut her eyes. "Forgive me, Princess."

The truth was, it had been hard enough making the long trek out. Correspondence hadn't felt right; this wasn't something they felt comfortable talking about. No one had seen them off that morning, and they'd said no goodbyes.

"I understand," said the princess.

She turned back to the anxiously waiting group. "Yogurt Cup. Holdfast. I'm very sorry to have raised your hopes." Celestia bowed to a slim white earth pony and blue-gray pegasus, her head almost touching the bricks. It was the first bow Pinkie had ever seen her make. "It seems your service will not be required."

The white mare's jaw quivered; the blue-gray stallion's nostrils flared. Were they going to be angry? No—they recovered.

"It's all right, your majesty," said the mare, her voice catching. "No worries."

"If you should ever need us..." breathed the stallion.

"I'll call," said Celestia. "Your kindness and loyalty will not go unremembered. But for now, you may return to your rooms, and the stewards will see you home."

The two bowed and left, leaving the mood even more somber than before.

But Celestia broke it with a shimmer of her horn and a flourish of her wings. "My dear friends...allow me to introduce your replacements!" She gestured then to a black unicorn stallion, whose horn was black at its base and lightened to white at its tip. "Applejack, please meet Vanishing Point, the new keeper of Honesty."

"Pleased t'make yer acquaintance," she mumbled, curtsying to the unicorn.

He only nodded back. Creepy!

Jackie seemed just as unnerved. "Cain't say I ever met anyone black before," she admitted. "Exceptin' Nightmare Moon, of course."

Pinkie thought that was a little rude of ~~Racist~~ Jackie, but the stallion didn't seem upset. "Don't worry—I'm perfectly trustworthy, and perfectly safe," he told her. Somehow, the way he said it left absolutely no doubt of his truthfulness.

"Glad to hear it," declared Jackie.

"Pinkie Pie," said Celestia, spurring Pinkie to whirl around on one forehoof with her nose pointing like a compass needle in her direction. "I believe you already know Derpy Hooves, once known as Bright Eyes. She will be replacing you as the keeper of Laughter."

Pinkie laughed anew. Of course she knew Derpy! "Sure! She delivers all the mail, and she makes a mean muffin!"

The gray pegasus craned her neck toward Pinkie, eyes boggling, and then stepped forward to bow deeply. "Most laugh."

Was that a compliment? "Well, I don't actually remember ever hearing you laugh," said Pinkie, "but hey! I'm sure you're silly enough to follow in my hoofsteps!"

"She laughs with her eyes," explained Celestia. "Rarity...this is Birch." The princess indicated a light tan earth pony with a simple crest of sandy hair and a little pendant around his neck.

"Hey!" he greeted, drawing forward with an approachable air.

"Charmed," said Rarity, dipping her head.

"Birch is a free spirit who travels from one charitable cause to the next," explained Celestia. "He will be the new keeper of Generosity. And finally...Twilight Sparkle, I would like you to meet Mistletoe, an accomplished herbalist and magician from the west country."

The unicorn she indicated was phosphorescent green with milky white hair. She smiled a vague smile and flourished a hoof, which Twilight shook. "It's an honor to meet you, Twilight Sparkle."

"Likewise!" said Twilight. "Anyone in Celestia's esteem has mine as well."

Now the princess faced them all serenely. "I should like you all to spend some time acquainting yourselves with your counterparts. This transition is difficult for all of us, but there isn't any reason we shouldn't carry it out as friends. Feel free to wander the terraces; I'll call you back after a while."

Though it was midday, there was a mist shrouding the sky that dampened the sun and made it feel like morning. The four pairs wandered over red bricks and cobbles, along walkways and railings overlooking lower terraces or stretches of the mountain. Pinkie could hear the others talking, but she and Derpy had little to say. Instead, they just did a lot of sporadic laughing at little things—birds overhead, funny scents on the breeze, and so on. Derpy's laughs were serpentine and bizarre, but Pinkie had to admit they were cute.

In time, they stood staring at the horizon, through the mist toward home. "Far duty," Derpy uttered.

"That's right," murmured Pinkie. "You'll be in charge of a whole Element of Harmony for the whoooole country. I hope you're up to it!"

Derpy soared from the overlook to hover a few yards above. "Up to it!" she exclaimed.

"Oh yeah?" challenged Pinkie. "Can you tell a joke?"

The pegasus reflected, her wings beating. "How many green?" she riddled.

"Is that the start of your joke? Uhhh...I dunno! How many green?"

Derpy swooped down as she delivered the punchline. "*Too many frog!*" she cried gleefully.

Pinkie found herself awash in laughter. "You *are* a good joke teller!" she agreed, locking eyes with the wall-eyed pegasus. "I think we're gonna be okay."

Derpy offered Pinkie a nuzzle she was all too glad to accept.

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When the introductions were over, Celestia called them all back and instructed the new keepers to wait on various points of the brick star, with Mistletoe in the middle. Twilight, Rarity, Jackie and Pinkie were directed to stand off to the side, at the ends of the rows of guards, facing each other.

Celestia stood beyond the four of them and lowered her head solemnly. "I had hoped you would live out your lives with this mantle still upon you," she said softly. "With you, I resurrected a long chain of keepers, and though you held the Elements only briefly, you made quite a difference. My friends, history will not forget you."

Twilight hung her head. "I'm so sorry to disappoint you, Princess."

"Not at all, my faithful student. As my sister has impressed upon me, the fault is mine for concealing the Elements' true nature." She looked the four over momentarily. "You are brave," she told them, "to risk losing your love."

"With any luck," said Rarity, "we won't truly lose it."

"Ah'd hate to think ev'rythin' ah feel for Pinkie just ain't real," mourned Jackie. "But ah gotta know for sure."

Of course," said Celestia. "In that case, I wish you all the best of luck. Remain still where you are, and the bonds will be broken."

The spell was spectacular. It rose from the ground in a wave of electricity, emotion and light. The four ponies stood transfixed upon each other, their bodies tense, their hair standing up and waving. Pinkie was filled with wonder, with love for Jackie, and most of all, with intense hope that her love wouldn't disappear.

Please, Pinkie thought, leave me Jackie. Don't rip her out of my heart!
Please, please, please!

She felt herself going lightheaded as the laughter rose away.

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As Pinkie was applying compote to the last quince spongecake of the day, the bell rang. She looked up eagerly, but it was only Twilight Sparkle.

"Twi! It's good to see you. I heard about you and Scratch. Are you okay?"

The unicorn stalked in, visibly upset but ready to munch her way through it. Years of party therapy had trained Pinkie to recognize that state of mind. "Could be better," she snapped.

"Aww, Twilight! You need a dessert, don'tcha? And something nice to drink?"

Twilight heaved a sigh, plopping herself down on a stool. "Anything you say, Pinkie."

"I'll fix you up a lemon carimelt and an EBA smoothie," Pinkie offered. "On the house!"

"Everything But Apples? Pinkie, you're still seriously doing that?"

She shrugged helplessly. "What can I say? I had enough apples to last a lifetime."

"But...you...." Twilight slumped. "Sure. That'll be great."

As she prepared the treats, Pinkie felt that familiar pain again. In the wake of the spell separating her from the Element of Laughter, she'd felt so deflated it seemed like a miracle the balloons in her cutie mark hadn't popped. But why didn't it get better? Why couldn't she go back to the way she'd been before she'd met Twilight?

Now Twilight was beginning to rant. "How can there possibly be so many different types of music, anyhow? So what if I don't know the difference

between post-darkwave speedcore and proto-electropunk? I swear, it's worse than paleobotany!"

Pinkie brought the drenched lemoncake and smoothie out to the counter. "You didn't take her music seriously enough, huh?"

Twilight shook her head sadly. "And I thought she was just after some fun. I swear, Pinkie! The Element of Magic spoiled me! It turns out finding lasting love in the real world is a nightmare!"

"Have you tried asking Celestia for help?"

Twilight sighed. "Yes...and I have to give her credit—she does give good-sounding advice. I admit, I was worried the princess wouldn't care about me anymore now that I've stopped leading the Elements of Harmony...but she still writes as often as ever."

"Well, good!" exclaimed Pinkie.

"Still!" said Twilight, her mouth dripping with caramel. "Even she can't help someone like me find a solid relationship."

"Maybe you're just not ready," Pinkie suggested. "I mean, Rarity's the oldest of any of us, and she told me she's done dating for a while."

"She told *me* she's 'waiting for someone younger'," said Twilight. Which I *hope* doesn't mean what I think it means. But I miss her, Pinkie! I miss our high society life...I miss our burlesque act. I miss gazing through the skylight we had in our bedroom!"

So Twilight missed everything but Rarity herself? "Well, you could still do the act, couldn't you? You don't need to be *together* just to tour together."

Twilight shook her head and took in a draught of her smoothie. "It's not who I am. I was in the biz for her."

"It's too bad," Pinkie observed. "You were good at it."

Abruptly, Twilight locked eyes with her and snorted. "You know what, Pinkie? Sometimes I'm jealous...of Dash and Fluttershy."

The tears came without warning to Pinkie's face. "Me too," she whimpered.

Twilight took a big bite of lemoncake. "I don't know what's so great about integrity anymore," she moaned. "Celestia was right not to tell us the whole truth! She knew what was best for us all along...and now it's too late."

Pinkie turned away to put her final quince cake on display. She didn't want Twilight to see her face.

"I'm not the only one who feels like this, am I?" Twilight asked. "You miss Applejack...don't you?"

"Yeah," whispered Pinkie, her eyes wide and moist.

"But your love is gone...isn't it?"

Pinkie stood in silence for a few moments. The passion was gone, yes. It had felt like an inflatable chair giving out—she'd crashed hard. But there was a pressure inside her...she was coming to suspect why the pain wouldn't leave her alone.

"I...think it's still there," she breathed. "And I need to help it out."

Twilight looked up in surprise.

Pinkie came around and gave her a kiss, just under her bangs. "Sorry, Twilight. I'm closing shop for today. You can let yourself out."

Twilight sighed and closed her eyes.

Pinkie went to the door, but hesitated. "I hope you feel better real soon," she said. "If you need a party...for any reason at all...just ask."

The purple unicorn nodded and resumed drowning her sorrows with her smoothie. Pinkie slipped out. She cantered, and then galloped, for the path leading to Sweet Apple Acres.

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Pinkie couldn't help but smile at the smell of the donut trees. As the sky grew dark, she walked beneath groves of magically grown trees sporting donuts, crullers, apple danishes, and apple puff pastries. It had taken the knowledge of Twilight, Lyra, Bonbon and Pinkie put together to create these marvels from ordinary apple trees. The fact that Jackie still tended and harvested them like any other crop touched Pinkie deeply. She remembered how skeptical Jackie had been of the idea at first...and how thoroughly she'd come to love it over time, once the pastries had started budding.

The aroma was amazing. Pinkie let herself glide down along the bark of a tree—they all smelled like cinnamon, cloves and cardamom. She sprawled there, letting her memories feed her. What did she need an old magical necklace for? The love she felt for Jackie was real, even it had been reduced to a seed looking for sunlight. She could feel it sprouting all over again.

The sound of a cart pushing through fallen foliage drifted near. Pinkie shot to her feet. Even through all that sweetness, Jackie's scent was still familiar.

She waited until that pretty orange nose came into view. Pinkie had once loved that nose, and she *knew* she could learn to love it again. She stepped forward, crushing leaves, and put on a little smile.

Jackie stopped, startled. She stared.

And sat, right there in the autumn leaves.

Pinkie was shaking now. She just knew Jackie felt the same way. Didn't she? "I," she said.

The farmer blinked. Several times. But as she sat there, taking in Pinkie's fervent look, she seemed to suddenly get it.

"Wish," said her tangy voice.

Pinkie fought to quell her trembling. "We," she whispered.

There was a pause, and a tremor in Jackie's voice. "Could."

"Somehow..."

Another pause. "Be," said Jackie, her voice breaking.

Pinkie couldn't resist. "Cupcakes!" she said. No! What was she thinking?! She'd ruined it!

But Jackie chuckled. "Together," she said.

Pinkie sighed with relief. "In..."

"A."

"Box."

"Of."

"Cupcakes," Pinkie laughed.

"For," Jackie continued.

"Ever," concluded Pinkie. She choked on her own breath. "Jackie, please," she wheezed. "I know we said it was gone. I thought it *was* gone. But I...I still love you! It's just that...without the laughter inside, the songs and bells and sunshine living in my ribcage...I didn't realize there was anything left. But there is! I love you!"

With a deep shudder, Jackie rolled her shoulders. "Ah was hopin' ah wasn't the only one," she cried.

Pinkie went to her and sank her face into the farmer's blond hair. "You're the apple of my eye," she sobbed. "You always will be."

Jackie took on a wry but caring tone. "Ya know, Pinkie...jus' because ah farm apples don't *make* me an apple."

Drawing her head back, Pinkie gave her beloved a smile. "Oh, sure. And I suppose Fluttershy isn't secretly a tree, either!"

Jackie laughed as if she were just learning how, her burdens falling away.
"Ah'll be *your* apple."

"And I'll be your cobbler," murmured Pinkie. She kissed Jackie on the bridge of her beautiful little nose. Pinkie laughed then, and though it took all her strength, it was as sweet and heartfelt as if she were still laughter's vassal. She kissed and kissed, and knew that somewhere, a blue topaz in a gold necklace was shining, and a gray pegasus called Derpy Hooves was bubbling with laughter.

CHAPTER 5:

WINDOWS AND WONDERS

or

GOOD THINGS COME IN FIVES

#13: AT—Seriously Happy

Farm life. It wasn't for folks with poor attention spans, that was for sure. If you were the sort who needed constant stimulation, surprises around every corner—well, you'd never make it walking down endless rows, treading the same old paths under beloved trees day after day, spreading and raking mulch in familiar patterns all so things could keep on being the way they ought to be. On a farm, life was a cycle, and if you wanted something new, you had to bring it in from the outside.

Be that as it might, Applejack still relished those times when the day's work was gentle, and there was time for talk—talk that just might break new ground. Like today. It was early spring, and Mac had been breaking literal ground for hours, AJ planting in his wake. But even new land, exciting as it was, had the same tinge as the old. It was getting on toward dusk, and she was glad to be returning to the farmhouse, where Spike had been making baskets since noon and Granny had a pot of leek-artichoke soup on whose aroma AJ could detect through the window. "Smells right tasty, don't it?" she greeted.

The dragon, lazy thing he was, popped right up from one of the baskets he'd made, caught napping. "Whoa! Wha? Huh?"

"Spike! Couldn't wait 'til sundown t'getcher winks?"

"Sorry, Applejack! I'm back to work!" He leapt to it, grabbing two fresh handfuls of straw. AJ couldn't be upset—she could see he'd made three and a half baskets that day—a good afternoon's work by any measure, especially considering that they were bigger than he was.

"No worries, Spike—I see you've been keepin' busy. Shouldn't be long 'til supper. You seen Twilight around?"

He pointed toward the old hay barn they'd reworked for Twilight's science experiments. "Yep! She's in the lab."

That morning, Twilight had been collecting scions from promising trees, so AJ wasn't too surprised to find her at work with them now. Sure enough, they were bound in packets on the bench nearby, while the unicorn hunched in concentration over a vat filled with a sparkling purple solution.

"Heya, Twi! Don't reckon I've seen *that* around here before." So much for nothing new ever appearing on a farm—but then, that was Twilight for you!

Twilight spun around, grinning. "You're back early! How's the planting going?"

"Well, ah'm back early, so you tell me! The soil's better this year. Ah reckon you were right about leavin' that snow cover to melt, instead o' the pegasi whiskin' it all off like they normally do. That much moisture makes the tillin' easy for mah brother."

"Glad to hear it!" replied Twilight, her tail swishing with excitement. "As for this, it's a work in progress. But if it pans out the way I hope it will, we won't have to worry about cleft or side-veneer grafting after all! We'll be able to use a whole new technique I'm calling 'injection grafting'. Just sharpen the scion, dip it in, and pierce the bark down to the vascular cambium! Apply grafting wax, no wrapping required! We won't even have to saw off the rootstock—we can create new branches wherever we like!"

AJ blinked. Twilight could just be too much sometimes. "You sayin' we could make trees that grow multiple varieties of apple *at the same time??*"

"Well, I wasn't thinking of applying it like that, but it's possible! I don't know enough about the different nutritional needs of the various cultivars to say whether that would work—I was just trying to streamline the process! Think how much time we'll save if you and Mac can perform grafts with all four hooves on the ground! We'll pre-sharpen them each morning, and you'll just dip, aim, and pierce!"

"I dunno, Twi. Ah mean, we got by 'till now without any graftin' whatsoever.

An' you say this'll save us time?"

"Well it'll save money, and time is money! Like I told you, this way we can abbreviate the trees' juvenile stages, so they'll flower after two years instead of five! And it should result in smaller trees, meaning more yield per acre and less bruising due to bucking. And then there's the potential for hybridization..."

"Lemme stop you right there, Twilight." AJ ambled over and took in a deep whiff of the sparkly purple stuff. It smelled pretty decent, if a bit woozy, which was good—AJ wouldn't have let Twilight subject the trees to anything she couldn't handle herself. "So this stuff is our next big meal ticket?"

"If I manage to perfect it!" confirmed Twilight. "And I'm getting close."

"In that case, let's have a toast." AJ swished her hoof through the solution and raised it, dripping slimy and purple.

"Applejack! What are you doing?"

"I didn't ruin it none, did I? My hooves may be a mite dirty, but the trees can handle dirt."

"Well, no, it should be fine, but..." Twilight laughed and repeated herself: "What are you doing?"

"If this is the next break for Sweet Apple Acres, that just reaffirms you're the best thing that ever happened t'the place." Applejack gestured to the tub indicating that Twilight should scoop up a batch herself. "Or, to me, fer that matter," she added softly.

Twilight tentatively rimmed her own hoof with the solution and held it up. "Now what?"

"Now we whoop it up, Miss Sparkle!" AJ brought back her hoof, Twilight did the same, and Applejack let out a heartfelt whoop as they clapped them together in mid-air. Droplets of purple slime exploded outward; they laughed merrily. "To Sweet Apple Acres!" cried AJ.

"To farm life!" echoed Twilight. And, tail quivering, she returned her hoof to the tub for a double dip. AJ gladly did the same.

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The news came that evening. Not with the mail—all Derpy brought was correspondence from out of town wholesalers and the latest issue of *Tarpan Magazine*. She managed to arrive during supper, as always, so AJ gave her an artichoke muffin out of gratitude. Aside from the soup, there was chard, and orchard grass hay, and peach preserve toast for dessert—they couldn't skip dessert on a night when Twilight was so close to a breakthrough.

And it didn't come right away after dinner. They had some time to relax. Big Mac took Spike out back to practice some football passes before the sun disappeared, and AJ lounged with Twilight in the living room, savoring the relationship quizzes in the magazine as per their longstanding tradition. It was an issue of *Tarpan* that had brought them together the previous spring—"Finding Your Ideal Mate," the quiz had been called. They'd given similar answers, of course, but what had really sealed the deal was how much fun they'd had just taking the quiz together. Applejack was overjoyed she'd finally found someone able to approach romance with as much maturity as herself, yet without being a dullard about it. Since then, they hadn't skipped a month, and even when they didn't agree on all the answers, there wasn't a quiz they took that didn't convince AJ anew just how right she and Twilight were for each other.

Tonight, Twilight was on the rug by the fireplace while AJ lay on the sofa, and Granny was listening in from her rocker, which didn't bother the girls one bit. They had nothing to hide.

"Number five," said Twilight. "Would you trust your mate to make a major decision concerning your livelihood?"

AJ chortled. "Well, if ah didn't, I sure wouldn't be so lackadaisical about this whole graftin' business. I'll tell ya, if anypony else came to me with these ideas, I'd ask 'em just who they thought they were t'think they could tell me how to run my farm."

"But me?" asked Twilight innocently.

"But you, ah trust." AJ settled into her cushions comfortably. "I gotta say, Twilight, I hain't never felt so safe 'n' secure 'bout my livelihood as ah do now. Yer mah beautiful lilac-colored safety net."

Of course, Twilight was beautiful when she was blushing, too. "Well, I feel the same way."

"You do, huh?" AJ let her voice grow sly. "So, if I were to poke my nose into your magical research, and tell you I knew better than you, a unicorn trained by royalty, how to do your spells, you'd take mah word for it?"

Twilight turned back to look at AJ and smiled. "I doubt you'd ever tell me that, but if you did..." She shrugged. "How could I not believe you? You wouldn't lie to me."

This earned a shriek of laughter from Granny Smith. "There's a big passel o' difference 'atween telling the truth an' knowin' yer own limits!" she pointed out, rocking briskly.

AJ saw what she meant and resented it. "Now hold on, Granny! You kin be *plumb* sure I wouldn't go meddlin' in Twilight's affairs unless'n I had a *rock solid* reason for it!"

"Oh, ah realize that," croaked Granny Smith. "But jus' how solid *is* rock solid? You've got moods, Applejack. Always have, always will. Twahlight Sparkle may trust you at yer best—but if she trusts you at your worst, ah feel sorry fer the poor girl!"

"Oh, Granny," said Twilight, still smiling, "aren't you being a little harsh?"

AJ was about to defend herself, but that's when the knock came. And the barks of the farmdog. And the screams.

She and Twilight were up in an instant. "It's Apple Bloom," AJ uttered.

Twilight's horn glowed and the door slammed open. Sure enough, AJ's little sister was there, Spike and Big Mac looking worried behind her.

"SIS!!" she wailed.

AJ's reaction was instinctive: She crouched to eye level with her sister. "Git a hold o' yerself...please! What is it, Apple Bloom?"

The filly's coat was coarse and her eyes were wild. "It's Rarity! We were harvestin' gems out in the badlands and one of 'em up an' EXPLODED! It hit her right in the face! She fell down and moaned for a while, an' I thought she were gonna die! But then I got her up and she managed to walk back with me an' she fell down again outside of town, so I ran an' got Sweetie Belle t'stay with her, an' I got Nurse Redheart to come an' came a look, and then I came straight here!!"

Twilight was at the door beside AJ. "Rarity is hurt?"

"She's hurt bad, Twilight!"

AJ exchanged looks with Twilight and Granny Smith. "We better hurry," she said. "Mac, you give Apple Bloom a ride. Sorry Granny, you're on your own fer evenin' chores."

"I'll be fine," said the old mare. "You go tend what needs tendin'."

Twilight plopped Spike onto her back and the five of them were off, Winona's agitated barking echoed behind them as they galloped.

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They'd managed to get Rarity to the open-air clinic, explained Sweetie Belle, who was waiting frantically for them. The group hurried there and found the clinic's entire staff huddled around a bed, murmuring to each other and occasionally running for some piece of equipment. AJ couldn't even see Rarity in the midst of it all.

One of the staffers told them that they'd sent for a doctor from Hoofington, as Ponyville had no pony rated higher than Nurse Practitioner. Mac seemed contented by that, but AJ wasn't. "Don't you folks realize who this is? It's Rarity, one of the heroes who saved Equestria from eternal night and endless chaos!! Get us a doctor from *Canterlot*! Get us *two* doctors!"

She saw that she was making the staff uncomfortable, but she was in the right, wasn't she? If her good friend Rarity, an upstanding and important

citizen, was dying, why couldn't they get quicker help? Fortunately, Twilight took control. No need to contact Canterlot, she told the staff. She'd write personally to Princess Celestia.

It was a long evening that stretched into a long night. Applejack didn't remember it getting dark. She didn't remember precisely what happened when. She knew that Celestia had written back; that Rarity had regained consciousness, and then gone to sleep on her own accord; that the nurses had given her pills and powders to help her sleep and to ease the pain; that Rainbow Dash had arrived, and Fluttershy, and Pinkie Pie; that two doctors had arrived, one from Hoofington and one from Canterlot; that the two had argued and that Applejack had argued with them, though now she didn't remember what about; that Mac had gone with Apple Bloom and Twilight to see if they could locate any remnants of the gem that caused it all; and that the doctors had given Rarity something to suppress unconscious use of her magic, which was a problem for some reason.

Applejack found herself munching on fescue hay from a tub someone had brought, drowsy and aching in the middle of the night, unclear on just what was happening. Rarity was sleeping in a bed with white sheets, watched by a nurse; in the next room, the two doctors conferred out of earshot.

Rainbow was standing to the side, wings tensed and eyes hurting; it looked like she'd been there a long time. Fluttershy was lying on the ground near Rarity, barely awake; Sweetie Belle and Spike were asleep against her flank.

To her shame, AJ realized she didn't remember whether they'd even discovered the cause of the explosion. Apple Bloom had been going on gem-finding trips with Rarity ever since signing on as her apprentice last summer, and AJ had been okay with it, so long as they kept out of Diamond Dog territory. Now it turned out there were other dangers, too?

Was it really a gem that had done this, or was it a bomb, or something even more sinister? And what exactly was wrong with Rarity? She knew the doctors had theories, and suspected they were both probably wrong.

She thought about going over to Rainbow and chatting, but she didn't want to. All she wanted to do was stay there and wait for something, anything to happen.

There was suddenly a strange scent, maybe even a raw feeling in the air. Applejack turned around, and Zecora was before her.

"Greetings," said the mysterious zebra in full cloak, a pouch dangling within. "I have come to see what I might do for Rarity."

"It don't look good," remarked Applejack.

"At least she's stable," snapped Rainbow Dash. "Come on in, Zecora. Show these quacks how it's done."

The doctors were willing to give the herbalist access, albeit reluctantly, when Rainbow vouched aggressively for her. So Zecora raised the sheet covering Rarity and peered hotly at her.

"The color from her eyes is leached. And nowhere has her skin been breached," she declared.

The Canterlot doctor confirmed this. "There's no sign of an impact wound, either. We're dealing with a magical effect."

"Didja hear how it happened?" AJ asked.

Zecora nodded soberly. "It seems this was a boobytrap—receptive to the slightest tap! Pre-cast by someone loathe to let another touch her amulet."

"It was an amulet?" asked Rainbow.

"So Twilight said, when she returned and let us know what she had learned." Zecora was now conducting further investigations.

"An' where is Twilight now?"

"I'm here." AJ jerked as her soulmate shambled in, clearly worn out from the trip. But at least she wasn't blown to smithereens. Spike had made some speculative remarks about the gem in question exploding twice that'd gotten AJ nervous against all reason.

"Twi, what'd ya find?"

"This." From her neck, Twilight levitated a cord attached to an empty casing made from brass and some darker metal that had once presumably

held a gem. "This amulet was buried near an underground tomb, inside a black box that had rotted mostly away. Rarity found it with her spell.

According to Applebloom, the two of them cooperated to dig it up, and when Rarity levitated it to get a better look—the gem went off in her face."

She glared at the zebra. "And *now* I know better than to say there's no such thing as a curse."

"Boobytrap!" countered Zecora. "It's not a curse—it may be worse!"

"How much worse?" yelled AJ. "What is Rarity in for?"

"This trap was set so long ago," Zecora replied, "I fear that we may never know." She paused, gulping. "So far, all I have divined...is that she now is colorblind."

"Colorblind?" asked Fluttershy, speaking for the first time in at least an hour. "Oh, no. Poor Rarity."

"Heck, it could be worse," retorted AJ. "Being colorblind ain't so bad."

"It is for her," Fluttershy said. She rose to stand near Rarity, letting Sweetie and Spike gently fall to the ground in her wake. "She does so much with colors...."

"This is what I've been trying to impress on my colleague all night," said the weary Canterlot doctor. "The discoloration of the eyes is symbolic. But this curse—or trap, if you prefer—is a creeping effect. Clearly there's more than colorblindness going on."

"Give me some time," said Zecora, "and I will strive to keep poor Rarity alive. Some smelling salts will help her rise, and pearlwort balm will guard her eyes."

"We don't want her to rise," objected the Hoofington doctor. "She's recuperating well as is, but she already overexerted herself in getting here."

The three medical professionals started to have it out with each other, and AJ couldn't take it. She crept over to where Twilight was collapsed on the ground and lay next to her. It felt better than she'd expected to feel the unicorn's warmth against her, even if she was a mite filthy and not as warm

as one would've liked.

For a while, they just breathed. Then Twilight closed her eyes and nosed AJ on the shoulderblade. AJ met her there with her own nose.

After a while, she had to know. "You were away for a while, Twi. You have time to poke your nose into any books?"

Twilight nodded sadly.

"Any way of workin' out what sort of whammy Rarity got herself hit with?"

The unicorn's voice was very tired. "Like Zecora says, we don't know what it does. But it's almost sure to be a gem curse. I saw them mentioned in *Hazards of Pre-History* and then found a more comprehensive treatment in *Zark's Guide to Magical Warfare*."

"A gem curse? Did you look up the cure?"

"Yes."

"And...?"

Twilight settled her head down to the ground. "There is none."

AJ felt like she'd been hit. She'd been hoping for something easy but expecting something hard—she'd been ready to go on a quest across Equestria to find the ingredients or whatnot it'd take to save Rarity. But—"No cure?" she echoed.

"That's what the book said. Believe me, I'll read more books tomorrow. And the next day. But Applejack..." She could hear the tears in Twilight's voice. "Right now, I just want to go to sleep...!"

AJ flicked her tail against Twi's thighs and nuzzled her softly. "That's fine. We'll sleep right here. You kin just lay your head against mine, and we'll be fine. Take it easy, Twi." Her voice trailed to a whisper, and while she wanted to follow Twilight into slumber, she knew she couldn't—not just yet. What was going to happen to Rarity?

Fluttershy and Rainbow were talking to the doctors now, and they didn't sound calm. AJ couldn't make out anything anypony was saying, save for one line intoned by Zecora: "Though this ailment may be slowed, there is but one end to this road."

No. That was all she could take. AJ set down her head and let herself drift away into a tumbleweed field of the mind that eventually settled down to resemble sleep.

#14: *FR—A Tender Respite*

Farm life. It could feel like a prison, at times. There just wasn't any getting away from the land, and no matter how much you loved it, you couldn't help but feel now and then like something, somewhere was more important.

And there was no getting away from routine, either, it sometimes seemed like.

"AJ?"

"Yeh, Big Mac?"

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but wasn't we gonna start grafting on them scions while our trees were still dormant?"

"That was the plan, yeah."

Big Macintosh sniffed at a little green bud. "Well, seems to me they ain't dormant no more."

"Nope, they sure ain't, Big Mac."

"Hmmp."

Applejack let her big brother mull that one over. She didn't want to get into it. She didn't want to explain that Twilight had dumped out her purple injection grafting fluid and given up on the whole project, in favor of some wackadoodle invention that was supposed to help Rarity somehow, if she could ever get it working. Twilight didn't even help in the fields anymore.

She spent all her time in the lab, at the old library, or in Canterlot, chatting up magical theorists she'd studied with way back when. Spike still did a little work here and there, but if he wasn't accompanying Twilight on one of her trips, he was off visiting Rarity half the time.

AJ wasn't angry. Why would she be angry? What kind of a pony would put the welfare of her farm above the health of a dear, talented friend? Even if that friend did happen to be frou-frou, well connected, beautiful enough to attract new friends if need be...

No. That was enough of that. This was why AJ tried not to think about Rarity. It was too easy to get spiteful. Things had just been unlucky, that was all. They'd planted a whole new three acre strip of Cortlands and two acres of Red Delicious, using up precious pruning time to do it, on the assumption that Twilight and Spike would be pitching in to make up the difference. Now, AJ and Mac had more trees than ever to mulch and monitor for pests, and less time to do it in. Which meant they were falling behind, which meant the equipment was falling apart, which meant Applejack never even got to go see Rarity—

"Consarn it," she swore. "Ah just can't get that unicorn off my mind."

Mac was silent, falling still. "Which unicorn would that be?" he asked.

AJ was embarrassed. "Rarity. Ah keep worryin' about her."

The big red stallion nodded thoughtfully. "Reckon y'oughtta go see her, then."

AJ shook her head, dislodging mulch from the cart she was strapped to.

"Ah wish ah could, Mac, but we're drowning in work, here! We'll never get to the wheat at this rate, an' we'll have to buy extra flour for pies an' fritters, and we won't have no profits come fall..."

"Then we'll let the Cortlands go," rumbled Mac, and take care of the wheat accordin' to schedule. There ain't no shame in lettin' th'aphids have a few acres in times of sorrow. But you've gotta keep up with your friends...or you'll never keep up here."

He gestured to where AJ had dropped more mulch by the path, a product of her constant fretting. She sighed and turned around. "You're right, Macintosh. I'm gonna go see Rarity. I'll be back when I've got my head on my shoulders."

He watched her haul the cart back toward the barn, and just before she was out of earshot, AJ heard him mutter, "That's more like it."

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So now AJ found herself treading a less familiar woodland road. She had no personal connection to these trees, but they reassured her nonetheless. When it came to tending the sickly, there was no beating Fluttershy, so that's where Rarity was staying these days. Of course, Fluttershy's patients were normally animals, but she'd cared for convalescent ponies before, and seemed to relish doing so.

As Applejack hadn't had much occasion to visit the pegasus at home before, the wind chimes took her off guard. They were tinkly little things, giving the cottage clearing an air of natural magic. Two or three different tones would sound at once when a breeze came up, and when it fell away, there'd be just a distant tinkle from over the hill, letting you know the breeze was still alive somewhere. AJ realized she was feeling calmer already.

Her next surprise was when it was Rarity who met her at the door. The fashionista was wearing her designer glasses, but showed no sign of injury aside from a general lack of pep. "Applejack!" she exclaimed affectionately. "You've come to visit!"

"Sure have, sugarcube. Land sakes, Rarity, you're looking great! Compared to the last time ah saw you, that is."

Rarity stood aside, her legs a bit weak, and motioned for AJ to come in.

"Thank you—that means a lot to me. I have to say, Fluttershy has been an *amazing* caretaker. And such a friend, besides!"

AJ's third surprise came when she stepped inside and found cloth, shears, sewing tapes, threads, ironing boards, pincushions, and other sewing supplies scattered everywhere. "Whoa, nelly! Looks like you been keepin' busy down here."

"I could hardly neglect my business, could I?"

"Well, ah reckon not. So you still got customers?"

"I am so fortunate, yes." Rarity set herself down before a half pieced-together yellow garment of some sort and commenced folding it carefully in her hooves, straightening the ends with her teeth. "Your sister has been a wonderful apprentice, but she's not nearly up to the task of designing sophisticated couture on her own—not yet, anyway! So she's been

referring customers to me, and I've been doing my best to put together preliminary designs and sketches...which I then send back to Applebloom for completion—pending my final approval, of course."

It still amazed AJ that her little sister, with no less country spirit than herself, had turned out to be such a virtuoso with a sewing machine. In retrospect, the way she'd fixed up that old clubhouse had been a sign. But the girl seemingly hadn't known her own gift until she'd spent an unexpected all-nighter with Rarity, staying on after a Cutie Mark Crusaders meeting to help with a huge last-minute order. Rarity had been beside herself with gratitude in the morning, but she couldn't possibly have been happier about the ordeal than Apple Bloom herself, who'd come out of it with a shiny new thread and needle on her flank. From that day forth, she'd been gung ho about seamstressing with a verve even AJ admired.

"She's findin' her place so fast," reflected AJ. "It's still hard to believe."

"She's finding hers, and I'm losing mine," said Rarity. "Or rather, endlessly sliding. Ever forced to find new places, unsure where I'll end up."

"Ah beg your pardon?"

Rarity looked apologetic. "I'm sorry, Applejack. I don't mean to gripe. It's just...well, I wish I knew the full extent of this curse! I feel like I'll never know when it's finished with me."

"No, I'm sorry, Rarity. Ah should've asked sooner. How're ya doin'? You're up 'n' about, which is terrific, but you're not outta the woods?"

"Oh, darling. I'm not sure there is any way out of the woods." Rarity glanced briefly out a window through which trees were visible. "I've recovered from the initial shock, but things are getting worse again." She paused to carefully insert a pin through the cloth's edge, keeping it folded while she used both forehooves to flip it over.

Applejack felt a chill invade her heart. "You're not usin' your magic."

"Zecora and the doctor from Canterlot agreed that I mustn't. My head aches when I use any substantial amount—they believe it fuels the curse."

"So the curse is still...in you?"

Rarity gave Applejack a very weary look. "There's no way to make it leave. I dearly wish there were."

"So it's makin' your head hurt and sappin' yer magic?"

"Among other things," said Rarity. "But please, make yourself comfortable."

"Is someone there?" called a thin voice from the round window to the backyard.

"Fluttershy!" answered AJ. "Yeah, it's me!"

The pale pegasus fluttered in, landing with a delighted expression. "Applejack, it's so good that you could come! I understand you've been busy on the farm."

"That's why it's good to get out now an' then." AJ stretched, planting herself Lyra-style on the loveseat. "And if it's all right, I wouldn't mind spendin' the day...though it sure is disturbin' t'hear about how Rarity's magic may be hurtin' her."

While Rarity resumed her painstaking work, Fluttershy nodded. "She's had so much to get used to. And yes, Applejack, please stay. I'll feel so much better about going out to restock the preening oil dispensers if I know you're here to help out Rarity, in case she needs it."

"Just say the word," affirmed AJ.

"Actually," said Rarity, "I could use *your* help, Fluttershy, if you aren't too busy. Might you identify a few more scraps for me?"

"Oh...of course!" The pegasus came over to the workbench a little nervously. AJ was baffled as to what they were doing.

Rarity drew out a long blue scrap of cotton cloth. She started to lift it magically; her horn shimmered briefly, but Rarity winced and let it fall. "Silly me. Could you tell me what this is?" She draped it over a forehoof

and lifted it to the light.

"It's a scrap of cloth," muttered AJ to herself.

"Blue..." said Fluttershy tentatively. "Chalk blue?"

"Any silver?" asked Rarity.

"Maybe...maybe just a smidge."

AJ felt like hoofing herself in the face. How could she forget? Rarity's eyes were still gray—she was colorblind, on top of everything else.

Rarity pulled out a piece of what might have been linen. "And this?"

"Oh, um..." Fluttershy clenched her teeth and focused her eyes in concentration. "Mauve?"

"Mauve? Are you sure? It seems darker."

Fluttershy's wings wriggled in what must have been anxiety. "Or...or aubergine, maybe?"

Rarity sighed pleasantly. "Flutter, dear, mauve isn't anything like aubergine."

Fluttershy lowered her wings. "I'm sorry."

"Not at all! Let's go to the books." Now Rarity rose, with some effort, and walked across the room, where AJ found a number of books laid out on a credenza, each depicting dresses, hats, tablecloths or other textiles, some with text on the facing page. Fluttershy joined them.

Rarity selected a book and turned the pages with a hoof, and at one point AJ noticed a tiny sparkle of magic used to get one page unstuck from another. "There," said the unicorn at last, pointing at a set of impressive, deep purple curtains. "Now *that* is aubergine! I remember them well—these curtains frame the proscenium of Destrier Hall, in Upper Fillydelphia."

She looked fondly into Fluttershy's eyes. "I was assistant to the backstage manager at a fashion show there for my graduate tour—did you know

that?" The pegasus shook her head meekly. "Oh, yes—Strawberry Sizzler was her name, and a more *forceful* manager I never met! She was kind to her staff, mind, and in a sense she was kind to everypony: it was *fate* she railed against, more than anything. But the models feared her, and I did too, even though she took me and the other graduate assistants out for daiquiris after the show. I still remember hearing her voice over the sharp taste of strawberries...."

Rarity closed her eyes, and AJ saw that Fluttershy was transfixed, unwilling to interrupt. Savoring the story. She was a heck of a caretaker, that was for sure.

"...So that's what aubergine is," concluded Rarity. "Almost royal, but darker. Whereas..." She blinked herself out of her reverie. "...Whereas mauve...mauve is more like Derpy's daughter, if you know who I mean."

"Oh, yes. Now I understand," breathed Fluttershy. "Thank you so much for clearing that up. I think the cloth may be more of a dark violet, actually."

Rarity smiled, her gray eyes twinkling, and AJ thought she saw something passing between the two mares. "Dark violet, you say? Well, then! That should do nicely."

For the next few hours of her visit, AJ tried to stay out of the way. Even when Fluttershy went to resume her chores in the yard, AJ and Rarity didn't end up talking much. At one point, Rarity pulled out a skein of yarn and said, "Applejack, could you be a dear and tell me what color this is?"

"Uhm...gee, I dunno. Green?"

"Yes, but what shade of green? I'd hate to use up the yarn only to learn it doesn't match the vest."

"Well, uh...pickle green?" AJ tried.

"Pickle green," said Rarity thoughtfully. Then she smiled. "Dill, or sweet?"

Was there a difference? "Ah'd say pretty dill."

Rarity smirked a little under her breath. "Thank you, AJ."

AJ shook her head. She had a question to ask, and considered being subtle, but decided after a while to try the direct tack instead. "Rarity, forgive me if ah'm outta line, but...are you an' Fluttershy fallin' fer each other?"

Rarity met her eyes, growing very serious, and AJ regretted asking. There was a long silence.

At last, the unicorn sighed. "Well, I certainly hope so! I can't think of a better silver lining."

AJ blinked. "Ev'ry dark cloud, huh?"

"Yes. Every dark cloud." And with that, Rarity returned to her work.

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For supper, Applejack was glad to be put to work. Fluttershy had her at the stove making crepes, and while her crepes might not have been the neatest or the pettiest around, they were chock full of good ingredients, and that's what counted in her estimation. The doorbell rang while she was cooking, and in poured the kids—Apple Bloom, Sweetie Belle and Spike.

Fluttershy welcomed them all in, of course, and for maybe fifteen minutes they were very well behaved, but then they started paging through Rarity's books and fooling with her fabrics. Rarity tried to keep them in check, but soon shrugged and gave up on doing any more work that day. AJ roped her sister in to set the table, and Spike made conversation with Rarity, and Fluttershy came in from feeding the mice and chipmunks and lit candles all along the upper walls. They all took their seats, Rarity said grace to Celestia, and AJ loaded up everypony's plates.

"How come we never have crepes back at the farm?" asked Apple Bloom. She'd been spending most of her nights back on the Acres ever since Rarity's accident, and AJ knew she resented it. "These are good!"

"Crepes have eggs in 'em," explained Applejack. "Fluttershy gets fresh eggs every mornin' from the coop, so I guess they've got plenty to spare."

"We should get chickens for the farm!"

"As if we ain't got enough work t'do," grunted AJ. She bit into a carrot and celery crepe with fresh black pepper, and found she agreed with her sister's assessment, even if half the contents did squirt out of one side.

There was hot spicy tea poured, and carrot juice, and Rarity gave Spike a small tourmaline on condition that he save it for dessert. (AJ thought she saw him pocket it instead.) It was a good atmosphere. Not quite festive, but bright and merry—enough to forget certain troubles for a while.

Sweetie Belle sat next to her big sister and shared whispers with her throughout the meal, and more than once Applejack happened to notice Sweetie cutting up Rarity's crepes with knife and fork, a faint pink glow surrounding them as she moved the utensils with her nascent magic.

Fluttershy complimented her on her control, given that her magic had only come in three weeks before, and for a while little Sweetie Belle was the center of attention.

Rarity seemed to be having trouble staying at the table by the end of the meal, so she excused herself early and went to rest on a pad by the door, which they left ajar to let in a cool draft. Apple Bloom finished one last gulp of juice and joined her to talk shop, and soon was excitedly looking over the prototypes Rarity had pinned together during the day. Spike went to go play cards with Sweetie Belle, which left AJ and Fluttershy to clear the table and wash up.

"I'll say this for ya, Fluttershy. Ah like the way you keep a home."

Fluttershy blushed as she moved to fill the sink with soapy water. "It normally isn't so crowded. Not that I'm complaining, of course. It's the inhabitants that make a home."

"Everypony's grateful to you. You know that, don'tcha?"

She turned in confusion. "Grateful?"

"For takin' in Rarity?"

The pegasus took a deep, calming breath. "Oh...but it isn't any problem at all. I like having Rarity here. She's so...so fascinating. And she's taught me so much I never knew about sewing! She's even trying to bring in a

photographer from Fillydelphia so that we can have a photoshoot the way it ought to be done. Or at least," she finished shyly, "the way *she* thinks it ought to be done."

"Ah thought you were through modelin'."

"If I model," declared Fluttershy, "I'll only do it on Rarity's terms."

AJ dropped the last of the dishes in the sink. "Level with me, Fluttershy. Ah want th'honest truth."

She blanched at that, but looked AJ in the eyes. "Yes?"

It had to be asked. "Do you like Rarity better now that she's an invalid?"

Maybe that was going too far. Fluttershy looked like she might break down. "I like her the same as ever," she stammered. "It's just that now...she's slower than she was. ...I can keep up with her now."

Applejack took a deep breath. "Maybe it ain't none o' my business, but...do ya love her?"

It was a while before Fluttershy replied. "I love making her happy," she admitted.

Well, of course she did! Applejack finished clearing the table and sat at one end. "You should tell her that," she advised. "She'd want to hear it." Fluttershy lowered her head and turned away. "Actually, I think she already knows."

Of course she did. Applejack sometimes had trouble remembering that not everypony was like her and Twilight. There were some, like them, who preferred to talk out every detail, take quizzes together, and use their love to speed up the pace of an otherwise workaday life.

But then, on the other side of the fence...there were those struggling to slow things down. For them, words just might not be necessary.

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Lightning. And it wasn't a stormy night.

Wait. *Had* it been lightning? AJ was about seventy percent sure she'd been asleep. But *something* had woken her, and it'd been something loud, and crackly, and she'd heard it through the window.

She roused herself from bed and went to peek out that very window. But suddenly, there was a big, smiling, almost *electric* face blocking her view.

"*Pinkie Pie?!?* What in tarnation—"

"Hi, Applejack! Nice night, huh? It was so nice I thought I'd come over for a sleepover! Are you sleeping?"

AJ hesitated to let her wits catch up with her, but they weren't coming.
"Uh—no..."

"No? Aw, that's too bad! Well, some other time, I guess! Seeya!"

With that, the bizarrely energetic earth pony went hopping along down the dirt road, and AJ blearily watched her go.

Then AJ's wits finally showed up for duty, and she noticed a bluish white glow emanating from the 'lab', sparking with electricity. *There* was her lightning. But what did Pinkie Pie have to do with it?

Pulling on her hat, AJ stormed out into the charged night and banged on the lab door. Twilight opened it a crack and peeked out wearing her sheepish face. The one that meant she was hiding something.

"All right, Twi. Time to fess up. What've you been *doing* in here, how's it going to help Rarity, and what in Equestria was Pinkie Pie doing here at this hour?"

There were flashes of light and color shifting within. Twilight squirmed, holding the door mostly shut. "Pinkie Pie has certain...skills."

"Skills, has she? You two throwin' a party in there?"

"Not exactly..."

AJ's heart was pounding. "Come on Twi, put yerself in my place. How does this look? You're holed up with one of our craziest friends in the middle of the night, an' you won't tell me what it was all about?" She fought to control her tone. "What happened to that trust we had?"

Twilight's ears fell, and she nodded. "You're right, Applejack. I'm sorry. You probably think I'm cheating on you with Pinkie Pie."

"If you just tell me you ain't, I'll believe you!"

"Twilight smiled bashfully. "I'm not! I would never. I wanted this to be a surprise for everyone, but..." She let the door swing open. "C'mon in."

What on Celestia's green earth had Twilight done with this place? Whatever'd been filling the lab previously was gone. The old barn had been built with one diagonal wall—five in all—and right now, four out of the five walls were flowing with activity. Bluish white lights in scrambled patterns, muffled sounds, even faint smells in almost every direction. "Ah don't even...what is this, Twi??"

Twilight's pride was manifest. "It's nothing less than the greatest invention since magic itself! Or at least, it may be, if I ever get it working right." She gestured to a five-sided lump made of black stone, sitting on a low slab of lighter stone and tethered by vibrating cords to pegs drilled into the slab's five corners. The lump was broken by five windows, each filled by a gleaming gem of a different color and cut. When Applejack looked closely at the gems, they too were filled with swimming images like those on the walls.

"I ain't never seen anything like it!" she admitted.

Twilight's voice fell to an awed hush. "Let me ask you something. I know we don't get out to the theater much—just the one time in Hoofington, really—but have you ever seen a play, or a puppet show, or anything like that, where the characters suddenly turn to the audience and speak to them, or acknowledge them, like they knew they were there all along?"

AJ couldn't see what this could possibly have to do with anything, but she nodded. "I reckon I seen a show or two like that."

"There's a name for that," Twilight confided. "It's called 'the fourth wall'.

Typically, the stage has three walls, and the audience is visible through the invisible fourth one. On those rare occasions when the characters notice that the wall isn't really there, we call that 'breaking the fourth wall'."

"Ah think I follow you, Twi...an as much's ah 'preciate the theatrics lesson, ah don't see what you're getting' at."

Abruptly, one of the walls went blank, the formerly blank one was suddenly filled with bleary images, and the other three seemed to blink into different states, interrupting what little continuity they had.

"Are you aware, Applejack, that for centuries, thaumaturges and cosmologists have been aware of the existence of an actual 'fourth wall', right here in reality?"

AJ wasn't even aware of what a thaumaturge was. "I ain't never heard anythin' like that," she said.

"Well, it's firmly established in magical theory. The location of the fourth wall is constantly shifting, and it varies depending on the locale. Now, there's no way to know whether anyone is actually *watching* us from behind the fourth wall...but some ponies have been found to have a preternatural, instinctive ability to detect it."

"Don't tell me. Pinkie Pie."

Twilight smiled broadly. "Exactly. I took her in for testing over the winter, when I brought her to see Canterlot. She was easily over the eightieth percentile for metafictional clairvoyance."

"So she's been helping ya out somehow?"

"Oh, her help has been invaluable! Look around you, Applejack! These images are almost clear—you can see consistent forms moving! I'm so close!"

It was true—they almost looked like living creatures. Another wall blinked out, replaced by the one most recently blank. "But Twilight, you got *five* walls goin' here."

"I'm glad you noticed! The fourth wall was known even before Luna's banishment, and she helped lay the theoretical groundwork...but in more recent years, the concept of the *fifth* wall has come to light! It's been tragically under-researched, but now!" Twilight cackled with glee. "Now I've proven the skeptics wrong!"

This was getting heavy. "Ya have? What's the fifth wall, then?"

Twilight faced Applejack with a naughty grin. "It's the wall between one universe and another! Imagine, Applejack, that the world as we know it were a work of fiction. The story it tells might vary in any number of ways, depending on the author's whim, or factors even more subtle! Small changes add up to big ones, which means that there's an theoretically infinite multiverse of different worlds out there, all stemming from an original depiction of reality, and all accessible through the fifth wall!"

"Slow down, Twi. You're starting t'scare me."

"Sorry, Applejack. But now do you see why I'm so excited?"

AJ stared at one of the walls, watching its blobs until they blinked abruptly into a new configuration. "Ah think so. An' I'm proud o' you. But ah still don't see how any o' this is gonna help Rarity!"

"You don't? Applejack, if I can get this working, with Pinkie's help, we'll be able to view other worlds where magical medicine is more advanced! We'll find places where they have established cures for gem curses—just examine the gem's casing and cast a simple spell! Or something else—who knows? Applejack, don't you get it? This isn't just going to help Rarity. It'll help *everypony* suffering from an incurable ailment. It'll help in so many other ways, too! It'll set technology and magical studies ahead immeasurably! We'll be able to see what would have happened if world leaders had made different decisions. Maybe even how the world would have developed differently if—I don't know, if sea ponies had become the dominant race! If the ancient cataclysms had never happened! If the legendary Rainbow of Light had never been destroyed!" She fell to a crouch, her voice much quieter. "Applejack...those who have lost loved ones could see them again. Hear their voices...smell them. They could find peace...say goodbye."

Applejack was enticed, she had to admit it, but she was spooked, too.

"Would they *really* be sayin' goodbye? Would the loved ones actually hear it??"

"Well, I don't know yet! I'm just hoping to manage one-way projection...but if we could actually *talk* to other worlds...or even *travel* to them..."

"...then we'd sure as sugar be muckin' *everything* up before you could say 'Crabapples!' Think about it, Twilight!! There'd be two of you if you went to another world, and that other you would wanna know how to bust down that fifth wall too, and pretty soon every world'd have it, and it'd be a huge frog strangler of a mess, nopony knowin' who their real friends are, everypony always headin' for someplace else they figger things're better, no stability nowhere. Does that sound t'you like any way to live?!"

Twilight sat down, cowed by AJ's scolding. "I...I guess not. I don't know, AJ. But don't worry...for now, it's one-way viewing only. All we're going to do is learn. And there's nothing wrong with learning, is there?"

AJ sighed. "Ah reckon not. But ah still don't feel good about all this."

"If it helps Rarity recover, will you feel good about it then?" rebutted Twilight.

"Ah dunno," admitted Applejack, slipping from the lab back toward the house. "I gotta sleep on it. At least one night. Ah recommend you do the same."

Twilight stayed behind, and AJ realized she'd left her frowning. She stood out in the open, under the moon, feeling boxed in despite being in the wide outdoors—boxed in by possibilities, by fourth and fifth and sixth walls, by imaginary Rarities that could've been, by worlds where she'd stayed with Aunt and Uncle Orange in Manehattan, or with Ma and Pa on the Trottingham farm. Eventually, she sighed a deep sigh and peeked back into the lab, where Twilight was sitting in silence.

"Come to bed, won'tcha, Twi? Ah'll be cold withoutcha."

Slowly, Twilight rose and turned, smiling sadly, and followed AJ into the

farmhouse. They could be together in body tonight, anyway, if not quite in spirit.

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As spring settled in, Pinkie became a frequent guest at the Acres. AJ was nice to her, of course, and tried not to think too much about her and Twilight's project. On those rare occasions when Pinkie got into the kitchen, she left the place smelling nice and overflowing with strudels and popovers.

AJ got into the habit of occasionally asking Pinkie which way the fourth wall was oriented. More than half the time, Pinkie said she couldn't tell, or that there wasn't one just then. Sometimes she'd point in a given direction (often slanted upwards, not level), and sometimes she'd spin to face the supposed wall, grinning and waving with her hair bouncing. Once she even released a barrel of exploding confetti into the 'wall', explaining that her 'friends' on the other side would like it.

AJ tried to keep it all out of her thoughts while she turned from mulching and pest control to the wheat harvest. But she couldn't. She couldn't dismiss it all as a wacky hobby because of the news she got whenever she went to town. Rarity was slowly going blind now. No amount of magic was safe for her anymore, not even a spark. She was having trouble getting out of bed, and often slept half the day. Intense concentration was beyond her.

Apple Bloom still ran the Carousel Boutique, and still visited Rarity in the afternoons to split the workload. Sweetie Belle kept shop, and Spike had moved in with them as an administrative assistant. AJ missed him, to say nothing of the baskets and other handiwork she now had to do without.

She knew she had to visit Rarity again—before it was too late—but it just weighed on her too heavily, and her workload was a handy excuse. She shared her breakfasts with Twilight and talked about lighthearted things—the way things used to be, mostly.

When the news came that Rarity and Fluttershy had tied the knot, and were now officially soulmates, there was a sense of acceptance and a strange relief, but no real excitement. It had simply had to happen sooner or later.

AJ was on her way to market one morning when she crossed paths with them, headed for the spa. Rarity had her head high, a pair of huge blue-rimmed glasses on that AJ hadn't seen before. Fluttershy was walking beside her, providing physical and emotional support.

Rarity's nose flared, and she turned AJ's way. "Applejack!" she murmured, as if speaking to a memory from another world.

"Yep, 't's me. Oh, Rarity. I been meaning ta visit you, ah really have. Ah just—I been so busy..."

"I forgive you!" blurted Rarity, and though her voice was weak, her spirit was abundant. "Oh, Applejack! How is the farm? How are sales?"

"Well, it's mostly just jellies 'n' tarts 'til the apples start ripenin'...and things could be better, seein' as how we overexpanded this year. But we'll get by."

Fluttershy looked over hopefully. "Would you like to come to the spa with us, Applejack?"

Well, the truth was..."Yes. Yes, ah would. I can do my shoppin' some other day. Is it all right if I tag along, Rarity?"

Rarity winked, giving her mane a delicate toss. "It would be an absolute pleasure!" she declared.

The funny thing is, it was. AJ told herself she'd be willing to put up with the fancypants spa treatment in order to be with her friends again...but as the steams and salts started to flow, she found herself genuinely relaxing, not to mention chatting. She especially enjoyed the pedicure, but it was during the peat pulp bath they finally opened up to each other.

"...and it makes me want to cry," said Fluttershy, "that we never discovered this affection for each other sooner. All those weekly spa days, and we never once kissed..."

"But darling, kissing isn't the problem!" added Rarity. "We can kiss as much as we like—a dozen times for each day we missed. The problem is all the things I can't do so well anymore. Sometimes it seems like there's a

new impediment every day...."

Fluttershy gave Rarity a heartfelt kiss on the lips as if to quiet her, followed by a tender touch just beneath her ear. "What I can't stand," she complained, "is when ponies like *Bonbon* say I only love her because she's feeble now! I suppose Bonbon thinks that I'm feeble, too. Well, I may be, but that's *not* why I love Rarity! I wish *so much* she could be better again! I'd even take the curse onto myself, if it would make her better."

AJ found her heart touched. "Fluttershy, I think you're mighty brave, an' strong, too. Ah would never call ya feeble."

"I wish I could be strong for her, too," whispered Rarity. "She needs a strong mate."

"She has one," insisted Applejack. "How many ponies do you think would still be workin' every day in your condition? Yet Apple Bloom tells me she couldn't keep the shop runnin' without your help."

"Well I must do *something* to pass my days. I miss the glitz and glamor...the stream of customers...the out of town trips...even the all-nighters."

"She's thinking of going in to the boutique one day a week," said Fluttershy, "which I think should be okay so long as I come along."

"But you have your animals to tend!" objected Rarity.

"They can get along without me for a day here and there," Fluttershy insisted.

Applejack wanted dearly to tell them about the project. But she knew Twilight wasn't ready to unveil it yet, and besides, she didn't want to get anypony's hopes up. Instead, she agreed to come back to their place after their final body wrap.

Those wind chimes seemed so mournful now. AJ knew there was a good chance the curse would never abate—Twilight had told her that gem curses often didn't stop until their victims were in the grave. Her mind kept imagining tombstones along the road—would that rise in the path be better,

or that clear spot beside the willow tree? "Here Lies Rarity—She Stitched It All Together."

No! AJ shook her head in frustration. There was no point taking her thoughts down that road. She had to enjoy her friends while she still had them.

There was a camera sitting in the grassy yard when they drew near. When AJ mentioned it, Rarity laughed with a hint of frustration. "We *thought* we'd be getting the Fillydelphian photographer in today—to do a photoshoot, you know. But yesterday morning, we got a letter canceling the appointment—no explanation. Just a few terse words."

Fluttershy was glowering. "It's like they don't care about her anymore. Like she doesn't matter!"

AJ could hardly think of anything more sad than her friend Rarity not mattering anymore. "Well shucks, that's terrible. You'd think they'd have the decency to be honest about why they're not comin'. Rarity, Fluttershy...I may not be too handy with a camera, but if you want a photoshoot, ah'll give you one."

They both turned to her with tremulous hope. "You'd put in the work, Applejack?" Rarity asked.

"Ah'll do anything y'all tell me to."

"Then let's do it!" Fluttershy exclaimed. "I may not be a model at heart, but...now I've got something to prove."

"That's the spirit!" said Rarity, opening the door gingerly. "Let's get that wardrobe together!"

Applejack, it turned out, was mainly needed for her eyes, and secondarily for her steadiness behind the shutters. She kept describing what she saw—the way the parts of the ensemble worked together, the lie of the light, even the emotions she got from Fluttershy's expressions. She struggled to articulate herself at times, but Rarity was patient. She suggested words for Applejack, and talked her through what each individual outfit was meant to convey, and Fluttershy tried out dozens of

poses, searching for the perfect way to depict the soul of the clothing. It took the rest of the day...but when they'd finished, they had five rolls of negatives they were all proud of, and Applejack felt like she'd learned a lot.

They all lay together by the stream, listening to the frogs croaking and watching the sun set. Applejack felt a weight welling inside her and knew it was hopeless to contain it.

"Listen, you two. I got somethin' to tell ya."

"Oh?" Rarity asked.

"Twilight'll be mad if she knows ah said anythin'...and I don't want you to get your hopes too far up, but..."

They were both gazing at her, mouths slightly open.

"...well, she's been workin' on somethin' that just might be able t'help you out, Rarity."

"Help me out? In what fashion?"

"In that...well, if all goes accordin' to plan, it just might cure you. But this thing she's doing, it's big, an' it's ambitious, and it might very well come to nothin'. And I can't tell you no more than that. But I wanted...Rarity, I just wanted to let you know that there's hope out there. A reason to keep on fightin', in case you ever feel like givin' up."

Rarity stared through those big blue glasses, and AJ wondered just how much vision she had left. "Thank you, Applejack," she eventually whispered. "Hope is exactly what I need." She sniffed and turned away, and Fluttershy helped her wipe away her tears.

AJ went home as the sun went down. A flickering old five-sided barn was waiting for her.

#15: *DP—Anything Is Possible*

Farm life. It was the most beautiful thing in the world...and it sure did pass the time.

Late spring turned to midsummer. With the wheat threshed and winnowed, Mac spent his days grinding flour, while AJ started setting out buckets for the apple harvest. She thought of faraway times to keep her mind off the present—games she'd played with cousins as a filly, adolescent hijinks and harvest festivals. Eventually, all her imaginary trails led back to Twilight's contraption and her damnable ambition. No matter what AJ recalled from her past—her first visit to Appleoosa, her last tug-of-war with her Pa before leaving home, the thrills and embarrassments of her summer in Manehattan—she could imagine that terrifying invention doing her one better. Would she peer into those magic walls one day and see herself as a big-city socialite? As an Appleoosan settler? All grown up and still working for her parents in Trottingham? Or worse—herself as a pegasus? A unicorn? A zebra? As someone somehow recognizable as herself, but with an entirely different life?

Applejack still loved Twilight, but she hated that invention for invading her imagination. She wanted to labor for hours under those wide blue skies and know that whatever she fancied up in her mind wasn't real, and never would be. That way, it belonged to just her.

Apple Bloom spent her days in town or at Fluttershy's place, but she came ambling back most nights to sleep in her old bed—AJ didn't know quite why, and didn't feel the need to ask. Maybe her kid sister just wasn't ready to sleep in a home without adults. Maybe she cherished the smell and feel of the farm in her bones, and couldn't part with it for long. Maybe she just needed the support of knowing that for some of her day, she was around family. She said good night when she got in and good morning when she left after breakfast, and in between she would either talk about her doings, ask advice, sniffle on a sympathetic shoulder, or else say nothing at all. AJ was proud of her sister. She also missed her during the long summer days. And sometimes, she had to admit, she even envied her.

Then one evening, she showed up with Spike on her heels. It wasn't unknown for Spike to visit Twilight during the day, but he and Applebloom

never showed up together.

"Howdy do!" AJ greeted. "To what do ah owe the pleasure?"

Apple Bloom hurried up to ask in a sheepish tone, "You reckon we can put some blankets in one o' the crates for Spike, and push it on into my room? He's gotten too big fer baskets, but I figure you won't want us sleepin' in the same bed." While Spike, if anything, looked more sheepish still.

"An apple crate? In yer room? You mean Spike is sleepin' over?"

"Sure he's sleepin' over!" announced Apple Bloom. "Didn'tja hear? He an' Sweetie broke up, an' now we're goin' steady!"

That was a shock, all right. AJ hadn't even known Spike and Sweetie had been a couple in the first place. "Goin' steady? Sugarcube, ya do realize he's technically an infant?"

Spike looked briefly embarrassed, but he spoke up proudly. "Twilight says I'm very mature for my age. Besides, I keep the books for the boutique all on my own!"

"An' he's a year older'n me, anyhow," added Apple Bloom. "In any case, it ain't too serious yet. We're just havin' fun."

"Riiight. Have you writ to Ma and Pa about it yet?"

Her sister was a little abashed. "Naw, I mean we just got together this week, and I don't know what they'll say."

Applejack figured she could guess what they'd say. *A dragon?! Our little girl's hooked up with a dragon??* To which one might reply that a dragon who's grown up among ponies is practically a pony himself, and who else is he gonna find to hook up with? *Well be that as it may*, she imagined Ma saying, *how come it's gotta be one of us?*

AJ sighed and smiled to the breeze. It's gotta be someone—why *not* one of us?

"Shucks, Spike. I already thought o' you as family...now you're just doubly

so, I figure."

Spike grinned and ran forward for a hug, and AJ stooped and gave it. They didn't need to sacrifice a crate—it turned out one of the biggest baskets suited the dragon fine, and so he went back to sleeping under the Apple family roof on those nights it suited him to accompany Apple Bloom home.

Twilight was tickled by the idea. "I guess he finally got over Rarity!" she observed one morning.

"More like he wanted a version of her his own age," AJ retorted. "I'm not surprised he started with Sweetie. She may have her sister's looks, but Apple Bloom's got her love for the craft, and ah guess as you grow up, you realize how much that matters."

To that, Twilight only turned aside with a sniffle and a tear in her eye. "Oh, Spike."

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Applebuck season. The feel of a kick placed just so. The rumble of plump apples finding their buckets, falling along the natural ley lines of the tree. The satisfaction of seeing a red-spotted field go green, tree by tree and buck by buck.

This was the time of year a farmer could really lose herself. When it all came together. When everything in the world was rich and juicy and made sense, and it was time for the big payoff.

Each day, AJ spent hours letting her body do the work for her, dreaming about applebuck seasons past and present, about making those light, firm fruits into sauce and pies and dumplings and selling them at market. The rest of her fantasies might be tainted, but that darn machine Twilight could never get working would never touch harvest time. This was the one time of year when AJ didn't need anything more than the here and now. Apples were her mark, her talent, even her name, and aside from being her livelihood...they were an end in themselves.

Was applebucking supposed to be work? The truth was, AJ would've have been happy to buck apples dawn to dusk even if—

"AJ! AJ!!!"

The farmer had to shake off her reverie and reorient, the echo of the most recent buck rolling in her mind. "What is it, Pinkie?"

"It's working! *It's working!!* Quick, before it changes—you have *got* to come see this!"

What? Oh no. Oh no! *Oh, yes!* AJ glanced to and fro in a tizzy before deciding to drop her saddlebags and dash off toward the lab. This was it!

She cantered in a few moments behind Pinkie, her brother wandering in behind her, having heard the early afternoon fuss. As she entered, the walls lit up as they had many times before, but now the pictures were clear. And the sounds. And the smells. It was hard to make out the voices with four different stories unfolding at once, four different walls aglow with images, but the images made things clear....

They were seeing other ways that could have been.

"It's back!" shouted Twilight. She glanced over to AJ and Mac. "You're here! Just in time! Look and see, look and see!!" Her voice was an overexcited squeal.

AJ was breathless. The old barn was like a gazebo with four other worlds in its windows, the fifth wall solid and blank. The perspectives through those 'windows' varied greatly. Here was a view into another room, intimate and close, while here was an aerial view, or a panorama of Ponyville, or a glimpse of a huge room from eye level, the ceiling or the floor. There were ponies everywhere, some of whom were familiar—*most* of whom were familiar, once AJ paid proper attention. She turned to one wall in particular—and there they were. All six of them, wending their way through Discord's maze, being turned from their basic natures one by one. AJ wondered if that was the most important thing happening in that world at that moment, or just the most important thing for *them*.

"We have to get the others," murmured Twilight.

Pinkie Pie nodded enthusiastically, but didn't tear her eyes away. She

intermittently leapt into a new position, raptly focused on a new wall, her ears directed elsewhere. "They've gotta be here, but I don't want to miss a minute!"

"I'll go," said Mac.

Twilight smiled gratefully. "Thanks so much. Hurry!"

Macintosh took off, and the stories intensified. They didn't follow a fixed timeframe, but jumped erratically...no, dramatically, whenever the narrative called for it. AJ saw Rainbow flying her first show as a Wonderbolt...Fluttershy excitedly fawning over her first model train...Pinkie spending a night at Carousel Boutique to play dress-up with Rarity and Sweetie Belle...

...And then, in all four windows, something bizarre and disturbing happened.

Applejack and her five closest friends...began getting even closer. Dates, courtships, and unexpected chemistry between them started to play out in the otherworldly theaters. Rainbow slipped in just in time to see herself taking Fluttershy on a romantic stroll through a liquid rainbow river field.

Fluttershy stumbled in, gaping, and couldn't take her eyes from a giggly kissfest between herself and Twilight resulting from a word puzzle they did together at a juice bar. And Rarity came last of all, supported by Big Mac, dark glasses now covering her eyes and a stylish, supple cane in her mouth. She stood stock still and listened to a particularly posh version of herself at some big social event, proposing that she and Rainbow Dash "make something" of their fame together.

It was too much to take in at once. While Mac lingered at the door, the six friends muttered frantically to each other, speculating and explaining, squealing and shuddering. Rarity settled herself on the floor, unable to stand for long, and Fluttershy settled beside her, whispering constantly into her ear. Was there anything left of Rarity's vision? Her soulmate must have been reporting everything she saw.

AJ wanted to take in her friends' expressions, but she was too engrossed in watching. It was everything she'd been afraid of, but it was also titillating. She was forming the bonds of love...but *not* with her true love, Twilight

Sparkle! Applejack watched in fascination as...

After a particularly energizing Running of the Leaves, Rainbow Dash asked her sassily, "Hey AJ! You wanna fall in love?"

"In love?" replied her doppelganger. "You sure you can take it, Dash?"

"Take it? I'm gonna be dishing it out! I'm gonna love you like you won't believe."

"Oh yeah? You better shine up yer saddle, Dash, 'cause I'm gonna love the stuffing outta you!"

The real AJ exchanged nervous glances with Rainbow, teeth showing. But then another wall drew her attention.

The sun was beaming along the pebbled path as Pinkie Pie skipped along, AJ trotting behind. "Are you sure your family's gonna like me, Jackie?"

"Shore I'm sure! If there's one thing Trottin'ham folks adore, it's a proper shindig. An' from what ah can tell, you got more delights wedged into that bag o' yours than one o' Granny's New Years pies!"

"I just want to be prepaaared!!!" Pinkie sang out, bells on springs trailing out of her bag and jingling as she hopped.

"Trust me, Pinkie, you'll be one o' the family before ya can say 'Swaller Dollar Cauliflower'."

"Why would I even want to say that?"

AJ chuckled. "Well, it's a challenge, ain't it?"

AJ turned to Pinkie, but she was engrossed with an image of herself helping Twilight with a hair growth spell, which led to them tumbling and tangling with yard-long hair all over the floor. So AJ examined another wall...

AJ stared in awe as a larger than life machine in pony shape started to churn, its tin hoof picking the strings of its tin banjo in perfect time, its tail

moving evenly to and fro and its mouth opening to utter an artificial "Yeeee-haaw!" Rarity was at her side, watching her reaction.

"I had it shipped in especially for you," she confided. "Please tell me you like it?"

"Well, ah..." She looked around the rose-walled building, with all its racks and shelves of endless cloth and jangles. "It does liven up the atmosphere here, ah'll give ya that." She winked to Rarity. "But as ponies go, ah reckon ah still prefer the real thing."

"Ah, yes, well..." chuckled Rarity. "Don't we all."

Rarity had her head high, her ears spread in every direction, trying to catch everything. Her neck trembled like it was about to fail, but Fluttershy placed her own against it to keep it steady. AJ turned to the final wall...

"But I still don't think it's right to take the honey from the bees," objected Fluttershy, overlooking a variegated farmland featuring a stand of tree-based bee hives.

"Flutter, ah know you don't like it, but the group decided they wanted an apiary! We're part of a commune now—we ain't in charge anymore. Ain't that how you wanted it?"

Fluttershy rubbed her mane against AJ's side. "Yes, it is. I'm glad we make decisions all together...I just worry about the bees..."

"Aw, they'll get by! We won't take it all away...an' besides, even if we don't take any honey, they'll still be good fer the flowers. An' you do love the flowers, don't'cha?"

"Yes," said Fluttershy softly, staring at AJ's face. "I do love the flowers."

"A commune?" said AJ aloud. "What kind o' dipstick alternate universe me goes an' changes the family farm into a commune?!"

Everyone looked at her in surprise.

"Well ah mean..." AJ gestured to the wall, which suddenly went blank,

another one taking its place. "Huh. ...Look, this is crazy. It's just crazy. Are you girls seein' what I'm seein'?"

"It's amazing," intoned Twilight.

"It's incredible," murmured Fluttershy.

"Yeah, it's pretty crazy, all right," said Dash. "But it's awesome!! Look, AJ, over here you're making a *wicked* good angel costume! I never saw *that* side of you before."

"We ain't never seen *any* of these sides before!" pressed AJ. "These ponies ain't us! They're in love with all the wrong sweethearts! Have you been watchin'? Everypony's fallin' in love with everypony else, *except* for me an' Twilight!"

"And me and Rarity," said Fluttershy, cuddling all the closer to her soulmate.

"I think I saw myself fall in love with everyone but Dashie!" exclaimed Pinkie, grinning.

"Yyup, it's crazy, all right," drawled Big Mac. "But the question is...where does it get us?"

"At the very least," said Rarity, "it gives us something to dream of. Can we do nothing but watch, Twilight? Or can we...interact...somehow...with these other sheets of existence?"

Twilight had to tear herself away from the bizarre sight of herself as a stallion, providing background effects for a Wonderbolts show. "It...well, the device is calibrated to the walls of the barn, so that they block us from slipping through. But if we wanted to, I could recalibrate it..." Alarm grew on her face. "The problem is, so far as I can tell, the only way to interact with these other worlds is to go through to them! And that would be incredibly risky. So far, I haven't worked out a way back!"

"Is *that* the only problem?" challenged Dash.

"Well...no. I mean, we're talking about something that so far as I know,

has never been successfully done. We really should write to the princess, and she'll probably tell us to take it nice and slow... she might even send her own corps of magicians to take over the project."

"What?!" exclaimed Dash. "But then what about Rarity?"

"Well, um...that's another problem. So far as Pinkie and I can tell, these four universes are the only ones adjacent to our own! I was hoping we'd have more choices, but..."

"There's a reason they call it the fifth wall," said Pinkie, "and not the three hundred seventy-ninth wall!"

"But then...can we ever find a cure for her?" asked Fluttershy.

"I don't know... Have any of you seen any sign of advanced magical medicine in any of these worlds?" Twilight asked.

The gang had to admit that they hadn't.

Twilight sighed profoundly. "It doesn't look good, then. I was hoping to open up so many more doors...but as fascinating as this is, I...I'm sorry, Rarity. I just don't see a cure for you here."

Dash snorted and scraped the floor. "Well, we can't just give up on her!"

"We won't," said Twilight firmly. "We'll write to the princess and put things in her hooves. If anyone will know what to do, she will."

Fluttershy looked up nervously. "But...but she has a whole realm to look after. What if she puts the safety of Equestria ahead of Rarity?"

Twilight drew in a sharp breath. "Shouldn't we *all* be doing that?"

"But—"

"It's all right," said Rarity, not managing to purge all the sorrow from her voice. "This is, after all, an invention of *major* import...and I would *not* want to bring disastrous consequences to an entire...an entire *world* of worlds, just in an attempt to restore my health."

"But it's not just your health," squeaked Fluttershy very quietly. "You could...you could die!"

There was a weighty pause when Fluttershy broached the subject.

"Nevertheless," said Rarity, nuzzling her on the cheek. "Twilight is right. I trust Celestia to do what is best."

Pinkie sputtered. "But...but...!"

Twilight looked to AJ. "It's our home. Are you all right with the royal palace getting involved?"

This was a tough one, all right. AJ never dreamed of royal magicians overrunning her farm for any reason...but she hoped the princess wouldn't let it come to that unless it was necessary. She nodded. "We gotta let her know."

"Then it's decided," said Twilight. "I'll send the letter tomorrow."

Pinkie and Dash looked crestfallen, but AJ was confident she'd made the right decision. Hadn't she?

"Twilight?" asked Rarity. "May I...may we spend the night?"

"Here? In the barn? Oh, but Rarity...you need your bed, your home...peace and quiet!"

"Twilight!" exhorted the desperate unicorn. "There's so little *left* for me there! I can't see a thing, my horn is useless, my head aches almost all the time, my joints don't work the way they used to, and I can hardly sleep these days in any case! Rarity...the Rarity of this world, anyhow, is almost gone. I'm not a fashion designer anymore. I can't find gems. I can't make anyone beautiful." She broke down then, sniffing and sobbing, and Fluttershy wrapped herself around her head like a pillow. "But here!" Rarity continued. "Here, at least, I can listen to other Rarities living their lives.

Successful. Busy. Maybe not all of them are happy...especially the one who used to love you, Twilight...but they're living life! They're what I could have been...they're me, more than I am now! Please, just give me one night and one day with them. That's all I ask."

AJ was about ready to break down herself. "Course you can stay, Rarity. You too, Fluttershy. I'll bring a bed out here for you, if ya like. You can have every pillow in the house. An' I'll bring you a carafe o' hot cider, an' a compress for your head, an' if you want me to run over to your cottage, Fluttershy, an' take care of the animals, I can do that too. Just lemme know what ya need."

AJ wasn't the only one with her sentiments. The others all offered to stay or go or help however they could, and while Rarity was grateful, she didn't ask for much. A few blankets and pillows...a little food and drink...and silence.

She and Fluttershy were still staring at the walls when AJ checked in on them in the middle of the night. But from the way they were slumped over each other, their bodies relaxed and motionless, she figured they'd finally fallen asleep. Rarity's dark glasses had been tossed into a corner.

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Twilight sent the letter, and the princess wrote back saying she'd consult her best magicians about the subject. Applejack didn't feel like bucking apples that day. She repaired a broken cart instead, and fixed a fence, and looked in on the five-sided barn more times than she cared to admit.

Twilight, Pinkie, Spike and Applebloom kept coming and going, as did a few townsfolk who'd heard something remarkable was happening.

Rainbow asked to see Twilight's blueprints, and Twilight was glad to show her, though AJ couldn't imagine the flight jockey comprehending them.

Even the mayor showed up around sundown and shook Twilight's hoof, lingering for an hour or so.

Rarity stayed well into the evening until, with a final sigh as though she were saying her last goodbye to life, she let Fluttershy slowly lead her home. AJ stood and watched from the road, wondering if she'd ever see her again.

The next morning, a representative from Canterlot showed up. She was a diminutive tawny mage with loosely combed green hair, her cutie mark an open box full of light. She studied Twilight's invention and watched the walls for half an hour, during which time she cast a half dozen tiny spells,

none of which disturbed the projections for more than an instant. She then announced that Princess Celestia would send a team to take over study of this discovery the following morning. Twilight would be handsomely rewarded and her invention would be treated with the utmost reverence and delicacy. If possible, it would be moved to Canterlot, and Twilight would be paid a stipend to act as consultant if necessary. Rarity's condition would be taken into account, as 'part of the broad picture of things.'

There was no saying no to any of this, even if they'd wanted to. This was bigger than Twilight and Pinkie now—bigger than all six of them, and they all knew it.

Applejack felt cold in bed that night, even with Twilight huddled up against her under the covers. Twilight was quaking in her sleep, and Applejack...well, she couldn't sleep at all.

This feeling she had in her—she recognized it. She'd had it before. It was like something about to tumble, quietness about to get loud. With a pang, it came back to her. There'd been a summer back in Trottingham—she'd been thirteen or fourteen—when the trees had all taken sick, but no one had realized it at the time. They called it 'discoloration of the bark', but they blamed it on the kooky weather team the town was training in and dismissed it. That summer, the trees had all gone bad, the harvest was ruined, and they'd just barely made it through the year.... Applejack recognized the feeling in her stomach from that summer, when things had just started to go rotten.

She rolled out of bed, tucked an extra pillow in beside Twilight, and wandered out into the field. It was a partly cloudy night. The moon lit up the clouds on one side—like they had something to say, secrets to share.

AJ fantasized about a pegasus bucking the sides of those clouds and a rain of apple-sized hail tumbling down, wrecking the orchard...or maybe it'd be some new, exciting fruit they could can and bake and sell. Maybe both.

She was having crazy waking dreams, and she didn't blame herself, because it still wasn't half as weird as what was going on in that old barn.

AJ stood in the autumn chill, staring at the morphing light just visible through the distant window. She felt the need to go where it was warm, the need to get back to bucking apples, the need to cry. But she didn't. She

just stood and stared, and kept it all in.

There was no telling how long she'd been standing when she heard a voice. "Pssst!"

AJ jerked, nerves tensing. "Who's there?" Then she spotted Pinkie behind a tree, her body covered with a dark poncho.

"Jackie! Thank goodness you're up! I was worried I was gonna have to sneak in and *wake* you!"

"What'd you call me?"

"Jackie! That's what one of my other me's calls you, and I thought it was cute!"

"Please don't call me that, Pinkie. That one o' you's in love with me, and that's just wrong."

Pinkie looked a little hurt. "Oh...okay." She seemed to accept this with a far-off look.

"Why were you lookin' for me?" AJ pressed.

"Oh! Well." Pinkie looked to and fro furtively. "I don't want you to take this the wrong way...*but I think you're the viewpoint character.*"

Oh dear Celestia. "I'm the *what?*"

"Twilight told you all about how the fifth wall works, didn't she? In order to find it, you need to know where the fourth wall is, and for that, you need to know whose eyes the 'audience'—" Here she winked and nudged her head against the air. "—is seeing through!"

"Ah don't follow, an' I'm not sure I want to."

Pinkie strolled with AJ, leading her back toward the lab. "Look at it this way. When you read a story, a lot of the time it's from some point of view or another. It's like you're sharing someone else's life! You know what I mean?"

"I'm with ya."

"Well, it's like that! If someone were watching us, whose life would they be sharing? That's what I had to figure out! The more I watched those four other worlds, the clearer it became who their point of view characters have to be! Rarity is the point of view character in that world where she and Dash got all famous for that 'Rainboom' clothing line, because she's the one who came back to visit the rest of us! Rainbow's got to be it in that weird world where they think it's shady for a mare to be into stallions, because she's the one with all the problems! And you remember the world where we gave up the Elements of Harmony? There was this whole bit where Fluttershy was wrestling with what to do, so I'm pretty sure she was the point of view character for some of that, but I know the bit at Celestia's birthday party where Twilight explained to me what 'stochastic' means was important too, so the point of view there had to be either me or Twilight! I'm figuring each of us gets one turn, because that's more fair."

AJ's head was swimming, but she ignored it. "Ah s'pose so?"

"And then there's the world with that masquerade, and that could be from almost anypony's point of view! But chances are it was either me or Twilight, so that leaves you! You're most likely to be the point of view character for *this* world! And that totally makes sense, because a bunch of times the machine suddenly stopped working as soon as you left, or started when you showed up!"

"How exactly does *that* make sense?"

"Well, there needs to be a fourth wall for it to work, but if the story is skipping ahead from one scene to another, there *isn't* a fourth wall in the meantime! While you're in the room, there's no way we're skipping scenes, but when you're off bucking apples or whatever, there's no way of knowing! What's more, the machine is working again, and Twilight's completely asleep, isn't she?"

"So?"

"So unless she's having a really important dream, she's not the viewpoint character! It's got to be you!"

With that, they arrived at the barn and stepped inside. The tales were still playing themselves out on the walls, and to AJ's surprise, Rainbow Dash was in the barn, dressed in a Wonderbolts outfit and carrying a loaded pair of saddlebags. She didn't look comfortable.

"Rainbow, what in the name of brown sugar are you doin' here?"

The pegasus glanced uneasily to Pinkie. "This would've been so much easier if we didn't need her here."

"Ah beg yer pardon?" demanded AJ. This was her home, after all!

Pinkie shook off her hood and perked up as if saving face. "But now that you *are* here, we've got a rock-solid scene! There's no way the walls'll conk out on us when we're partway through and slice us in half! Applejack, we couldn't do this without you! All you have to do is sit back and rest—but don't fall asleep!—and everything'll be okay."

In the shifting light, AJ saw that Pinkie was shaking with excitement—or was it fear? Dash didn't look much better. "Just what half-baked stunt do you two think you're pullin'?"

Dash swung a pair of goggles over her eyes. "We're heading out!"

"You're WHAT!?"

"Sorry AJ, but we can't wait for Canterlot to deal with this! If we let them take over, Rarity'll never get saved!"

"They'll seal this gizmo up and test it for *ages* before they ever use it!" implored Pinkie, her tail whirling. "And I know it's all for the best, it's all for safety and Equestria and the common good...but this is for *Rarity*! She's one of us...and I'm really sorry, and maybe it makes me a horrible terrible pony, but I care more about my best friends than I do about the common good."

"As do I," said Rainbow proudly.

It was too much to mull all at once. "But why are you goin' in the middle of

the night? Why didn't you tell Twilight or me?"

"Because in the morning," said Dash, "Celestia's wizards are coming and we won't get another crack at it! If we'd told Twilight, she would've just tried to talk us out of it."

"You'd better believe she would! And so would I! Do you two loonies even have a plan for gettin' back? 'Cause there ain't no return trips with this thing!"

"Eh, we'll find a way," said Dash. "I totally copied Twilight's blueprints yesterday, even if I don't understand a lick of 'em. And there are other Twilight Sparkles out there! We'll show 'em the plans and see what they can whip up."

AJ wanted to groan and collapse. "*That's* your plan?! What if they refuse?"

"Well, I'm *hoping* a good burst of speed'll be enough to take me through three or four dimensional walls, at least," said Dash. "Maybe we'll leave holes behind as we go! Or maybe some other powerful unicorn'll help us, if Twilight won't. All I know is, our friend's life is on the line. We can't just let her die!"

"Aside from which," said Pinkie, "this'll be the most awesome, amazing, transcendentalistic adventure *ever!!* Sometimes you've just gotta let loose, rear back, and do something *crazy*, you know?!"

"But this ain't just crazy," pled AJ. "It's insanity heaped on top of insanity!"

Pinkie grinned. "That makes it sound like a *sundae!*"

AJ slumped onto one of the leftover pillows. What now? "So you two planned this together?"

"Pretty much!" Pinkie grinned to Dash, and for a moment the pair looked less nervous. "Rainbow and I were watching the windows together and we gradually realized that every single other combination of the six of us was already coupled up, either in real life or in one of these new ones! We're the only pair who hasn't been done yet!"

Dash gulped. "So Pinkie thinks we've got to fall in love! Like it's our destiny or something."

"And we decided the best way to fall in love is to throw ourselves into it, like a swimming pool full of ice cream!! So, since we both agreed that *someone* has to go out there, shake things up, and find a cure for Rarity..."

"We figured we might as well go together!" concluded Dash.

AJ had to catch her breath. "That is the most absurd, ridiculous, cockamamie reason for fallin' in love I ever heard of!!"

"I know!" said Dash. "I mean...I'm not really the romantic type! I'm more about thrills and spills and pushing the limit!"

"And I feel like I've got a lot more growing up to do before I get involved with anyone," added Pinkie. "But that doesn't matter! Destiny is destiny, and time is running out!"

"But you could be gone forever, both of you!" moaned AJ. "And Rarity'll die...and they'll take the machine away, and I'll get in trouble for lettin' you go in, and Twilight might end up takin' the blame..."

"Look on the bright side, Applejack," said Pinkie, her overconfident voice undercut by a tremor of terror. "With all these other realities out there, anything is possible! Maybe another Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash or another Rarity'll come visit you someday! ...And if they do, will you make them feel welcome? I won't be around to throw any welcome parties 'til we get back."

AJ surged forward. "*If* you get back!"

"...So you're gonna have to pick up the slack with your country charm," continued Pinkie. "Promise you'll do it? You can be mad if you want, but please...promise me if anyone new comes to town, especially from beyond the fifth wall...you'll make 'em feel welcome."

AJ sighed. "All right, I promise. I'll do ya proud, Pinkie Pie. An' I'll tell everypony goodbye for you both. Ah *wish* you wouldn't do this, though."

"We've all got wishes," said Pinkie. "Those of us who're lucky get rainbows to make them on! And the way I see it, this is like the quest for the end of a rainbow! If we follow the trail long enough, we're sure to find a pot of gold at the end!"

"And I keep telling her, that's hogwash!" countered Dash. "We weather pegasi *make* rainbows, and there's nothing in the manual about including a pot of gold."

"Well you don't have to *put* it there, silly!" retorted Pinkie. "It just shows up! Besides, I'm talking about a metaphor, not a real pot of gold, even if that'd be nice to have. I mean, the gold would be pretty valuable—it'd keep us fed for a while, especially since I hear you can put gold flakes on sundaes and eat them! But mainly? I just want to find it! I'd just like to have a pot I can keep at the foot of my bed and put laundry and stuff in...a pot I can say I found at the end of a rainbow!"

Dash gave Pinkie a nervous little peck on the neck AJ couldn't help but find adorable. "You know, I heard one of my other selves—the angsty one—saying how for all she knew, love was totally random. Anypony could end up with anypony, all on account of the slightest little thing." She smiled coyly. "Well, if that's true, this should be *more* than enough to bring me and Pinkie together!"

Pinkie leaned her head against Rainbow's neck. "If love is a random tree, I'm it's funny little seed!"

"Ah reckon that makes you stochastic," quipped AJ. "Maybe you two *are* made for each other. Y'sure do seem to share a love for breakin' the rules."

"Whether it's the rules of society or the laws of physics," agreed Pinkie.

"So you're okay with this?" asked Dash, and AJ could see her quaking in her flightsuit. "You won't stop us from going?"

AJ squinched her eyes shut. It was now or never. "No, ah won't stop you. But ah am gonna miss you somethin' fierce!"

"Wouldn't have it any other way," said Rainbow Dash, turning toward the

blank wall and gearing up. "Hope you won't miss the barn, though."

"Miss the barn? What're you talking a—"

Dash powered forward, bursting through the old wall like a knife through a pie crust. The barn started to teeter, and AJ scurried out. She and Pinkie watched as Dash rose high in the air, reoriented herself straight downward, and plunged into the barn at full speed, splintering it with a rainbow-colored mushroom cloud.

Well, that'd wake the household, if anything would. The poor old five-sided barn was destroyed, but Twilight's machine was still pumping—the images stayed right where they had been, only now there were no walls behind them.

"Wooo-hooo!" shouted Dash. Pinkie echoed her cry, speeding over. She leapt onto Rainbow's back, waving her poncho above her like a banner.

"To adventure!!"

"Ah hope you two know what yer doin'!" cried AJ, tears in her eyes.

"Be seeing you, AJ!" shouted Dash, sparing her a soulful glance before she revved up. "All right, Pinkie! Let's do this!!"

And with that, dust still swirling from the barn's destruction, Rainbow Dash sprinted away from the barn until her hooves were off the ground. With Pinkie holding tight, she swung around, soared forward, gathered speed, and zoomed headlong into one of the otherworldly windows.

With a loud CRACK, the ground shook and the windows all flickered out. Pinkie and Rainbow were gone. The machine buzzed, sputtered, and went dead.

Applejack stumbled over to the machine, bile rising in her throat along with everything she'd wanted to say. She strained to gather her senses while the dust settled.

"Y'all come back soon now, y'hear?" she whimpered mournfully into the empty air.

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"This is a prank, right?" asked Twilight, panic rising in her voice and eyes.
"Tell me this is a prank!"

"If those two were pranking us, they fooled me too," said AJ. She couldn't look away from the place where the barn had stood.

"They wrecked all my calibration!" moaned Twilight, stooping to examine her device. "They wrecked the machine!! I don't know if I can fix it, and Celestia's staff is coming in a matter of hours! And Pinkie...Rainbow...oh goodness...Pinkie! Rainbow!!"

AJ found herself with her legs wrapped around Twilight, soaking up tears.
"Ah dunno what to tell ya, Twi. Ya still got me, an' you'll always have me. No matter what may come."

"They'll be lost," sobbed Twilight.

"Uh, well...maybe it ain't the best time to mention it, but Dash said she nicked a copy of your invention's plans."

Twilight went stiff in AJ's grip. "Oh, gosh!" she wailed. "*We'll* be lost!"

"You worried about interdimensional traffic, Twi?"

She nodded numbly. "This could be the end of spatio-temporal coherence through the multiverse, and it's *all my fault!*"

AJ hugged her all the harder. "Now hush, Twilight. Maybe that's so, but I don't feel it in mah bones. Maybe if we do get visitors, they won't be all that bad. And the Apple family'll be on hand to welcome 'em."

Twilight closed her eyes and hugged back, which was just what AJ needed.

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It was weird, and then some.

The magic team from Canterlot showed up fresh and sharp that morning. There was no point keeping them away. But there also wasn't much left for them to see, and AJ saw no reason not to tell the honest truth, so she did, even though it made Twilight squirm. The magicians questioned them for hours, and then they took away the machine, and that was the end of it. No one came to take AJ or Twilight away, but there was no 'handsome compensation', either. When Twilight wrote to Celestia about it, the sagacious princess simply said that regarding the future of fifth wall technology, they would have to "wait and see".

So they did. AJ went back to applebucking, and the mayor held a little reception at Town Hall in honor of Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash, the 'interdimensional pioneers'. It was somber and there weren't enough sweets. AJ went to visit Rarity and Fluttershy whenever she had a spare afternoon, but there weren't going to be any more photoshoots. Rarity was simply too weak. There wasn't anything to do but murmur, help Fluttershy with chores, and leave when the silences had gotten too long. Applejack was glad to visit just the same, but there weren't words for how much she missed the old days.

But then came the first Scootaloo.

It was mid-morning, late in autumn, and AJ was making applesauce in the yard while the scent of Granny Smith's dumplings wafted out from the kitchen. It wasn't all that surprising to see Scootaloo wander up as though drawn by the scent, though it *had* been a long time since the pegasus filly had been by to play with Apple Bloom. When Apple Bloom got her cutie mark, AJ reflected, she and Scootaloo had drifted apart, even while she was growing closer to Sweetie Belle. Still, the kid was an orphan, and if she wanted a free dumpling or two, how could AJ say no?

But this filly wasn't after food. "Hey, Applejack? I know this may seem like the weirdest question you ever heard, but...does your world still have its Rainbow Dash?"

Uh oh. "Ah beg your pardon?"

"Rainbow Dash! Is she still here? I'm kind of on a quest."

This was bad...wasn't it? "Somethin' tells me you ain't the Scootaloo we know and love, are ya?"

The filly's face lit up. "You mean you still have your Scootaloo? Awesome. I'm gonna have to recruit her!"

"Recruit her?"

"For the council!"

The *council*?!

Well, AJ laid the facts out for the kid as plainly as she could, and was given a befuddling tale in return. This Scootaloo was in possession of a world traveling technology that worked *only* for Scootaloos. She didn't know who'd invented it first—she'd been issued hers by a roving band of Scootaloos who were traveling from world to world, recruiting promising young Scootaloos and sending them to promising nearby worlds in order to find Rainbow Dashes, Pinkie Pies, and other Scootaloos, in that order of importance. Their mission: to restore every Rainbow and every Pinkie to her proper home. Apparently things had gotten very messy early on, and some brave young Scootaloo—possibly more than one—had set out after her idol Rainbow through the fifth wall, trying to protect her, rescue her, follow in her hoofsteps, warn her about something—no pony knew. All this filly knew was that dozens, maybe hundreds of worlds' worth of Rainbow Dashes and Pinkie Pies had gotten infected with the ability and desire to go jumping from world to world, for every reason under the sun, and they were causing endless—some said wonderful—chaos everywhere they went.

Twilight was simultaneously fascinated and inconsolable. She said she didn't know whether to be proud or terrified, nor whether she'd even been the first version of herself to invent fifth wall breaching technology. AJ, however, took it in stride. She arranged for the wayfaring Scootaloo to meet her local twin, which went much better than AJ had expected, and then happily put them both up at the farmhouse for a few days while they got their bearings before the two of them headed off again for places unseen.

AJ thought the weirdness was over, but then came a group of five Scootaloos, all dressed in different studded black costumes and each with

her own customized interdimensional scooter. They were touring worlds recently added to the 'map' for leads, and while they were disappointed to hear that this world's Rainbow and Pinkie had already flown the coop, they were excited to hear Twilight's account of, from her perspective, being the first to invent interworld travel technology. "Awesome!" said one Scootaloo.

"Sweet," said a second.

"Bodacious!" exclaimed a third.

It wasn't long before a whole colony of Scootaloos got started. It was well into winter by then, not a good time for building, so the Sweet Apple Acres farmhouse got awfully crowded for a while, but it was all for the best. Big Mac knew how to keep the ruffians under control when they got infectiously unruly, and Princess Celestia, hearing about the situation, sent a pair of guards from the palace to help maintain order. Fluttershy was glad to take in a few of the quieter Scootaloos—including one who was, bizarrely, not a pony at all, but a talking chicken—for days or weeks at a time to keep things running at her place, and Rarity seemed generally glad for the youthful company, monotonous though it might be. There were times the horde got huge—at one point, over three dozen Scootaloos had made this world their headquarters—but at other times, it thinned out to only a scattering. They talked occasionally about relocating to worlds they'd heard were cooler, but AJ made sure they felt so welcome that these plans never came to fruition.

The funniest thing about it all was when AJ led a field trip to Trottingham for a winter rodeo, and five Scootaloos got their cutie marks simultaneously.

They were all delighted and excited beyond belief, and interestingly, the marks were all different. There was a scooter with racing stripes, a scooter with painted wheels, a scooter with lightning coming from its handlebars, a silhouetted bull being roped to the ground, and, weirdest of all, a tray of nachos. When Twilight heard about the phenomenon, she threw herself into writing academic papers about cutie mark science—the discovery that one pony could have different marks in different worlds was highly significant. It meant that cutie marks were not destined from birth, but rather depended on circumstances—and if that were true of cutie marks, Applejack mused, surely it was true of love, too? Gradually, it didn't seem so weird that those other Applejacks had had their own tastes in sweethearts. She had Twi, and that was enough. Let Applejacks be

Applejacks however they wished, wherever they might call home—she was herself, and she made her life the way she liked it.

Winter Wrap-Up brought a shock. The colony of Scootaloos announced that they'd arranged for a screw of thirty-one Pinkie Pies to drop by, score all the frozen lakes with ice skates, and leave by late morning in order to serve other worlds' Wrap-Ups. AJ fought to remain sane that night.

The next morning, when the thirty-one Pinkies arrived, she bid them howdy-do, passed out mulled hot cider, and asked whether any of them was the native Pinkie to this world, as determined by whether she remembered the partly-cloudy moonlit night of her departure. Sadly, that particular Pinkie was not among the crew, so AJ only watched with a certain solemnity as the row of Pinkie Pies sped in perfect unison across the lake, with the exception of two or three who were trying to trip the others up just for fun, one who was inexplicably clumsy, one who had forgotten her ice skates, and one who waited by the shore to throw a party for all the others when they were done.

As the year's ploughing began, it came to light that the Interdimensional Council of Scootaloos had begun phasing itself out, reportedly due to a well-inculcated lesson in several of their number from a particularly acute Princess Celestia many worlds away. They had been convinced that the multiverse was unready for interdimensional travel, and perhaps never would be; as such, they were working in tandem with the Twilight Sparkles and other magicians of the various worlds to send everyone home to where they originally came from, and to disable their travel devices once this was done. For some of the Scootaloos, this news was bittersweet; some fought it tooth and hoof, but were outvoted or talked down; others took it easily, their lark complete, while still others accepted it as a solemn duty.

Soon, the colony of Scootaloos was down to half a dozen, and procedures were in place to find a way home even for them, excepting the one native to this world. They stayed up late at night, playing cards and busting dance moves and reminiscing, knowing that their bawdy days of pure camaraderie would soon be over, and they would be forced to return to normal lives, though their bizarre youthful period was something AJ was sure none of them would ever, ever forget.

One morning in early spring, while AJ was still somewhat groggy from a

short night's sleep, she answered a knock on the door to find Pinkie Pie standing before her. It took her several seconds to even work out how she ought to feel, which of course was *confused*—was this the authentic Pinkie, or just another visitor, albeit still worthy of love? It was the latter, it turned out. This Pinkie was a relatively sane, sober specimen of her kind, who explained that she was there to throw a regulation party for the last five rogue Scootaloos in this world before leading them away once and for all.

Applejack was sad to hear it, but she nodded. What had to be done had to be done, and it would be nice to have a Pinkie there for the day, for old times' sake.

The day was cold and the party was pleasant, if tame—pin the tail on the pony and block stacking games featured heavily—and just before Pinkie left, with the gaggle of orange fillies gathered outside, she had an afterthought and set a couple of objects on the table—a white package and an orange envelope. "Oooh—I almost forgot! This package is for your Rarity, and the card's for you."

Applejack's heart skipped a beat.

"What's in the package?" she managed to ask.

"No idea! If I knew, though, I wouldn't tell... 'cause that'd spoil the surprrii-iiise! I know what the card is, though! It's from the Council of Scootaloos, thanking you for all your hard work these last few months! It's been a weird time for the multiverse, and every little bit of help counts!"

Applejack felt tears coming to her eyes and adrenaline coursing through her legs. "The *package*! What's in the package?!?"

"I told you, I don't know!"

"*Is it a cure?! Is it a cure for an ancient gem-based curse??*"

"I don't know!! It could be! That's the sort of thing they send in these packages, so...maybe?"

Applejack clutched the package hard with both forehooves. "Can I open it now?" she demanded. "Or has it got to be in Rarity's presence?"

"I don't make the rules!" said Pinkie Pie. "If you're okay with spoiling what could be a fun surprise...*FOREVER!!!*...then go right ahead! Anyway, I've gotta be off. Thanks again for everything!"

Applejack nodded numbly and watched the Pinkie from another world lead the gaggle of Scootaloos away through a portal that blinked open just long enough for them to slip through. She took five shallow breaths, struggling to still her heart.

Then she tore open the box.

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"RARITY! RARITY!!!"

Applejack hollered as she raced down the path, the grass-covered cottage finally coming into view after what seemed like twice the time it should have taken.

"RARITY!!!" she called again. Fluttershy was there on the grass already—that was quick! Had someone warned her? Applejack hurried up, ready to—oh no. Fluttershy was crying. Oh no, Celestia, no! She was bowing her head, her wings folded. Oh no!!

"Fluttershy?!" Applejack called.

Fluttershy looked up in surprise. "Applejack?" she whimpered.

Applejack stopped short before Fluttershy, peering at the yellow pegasus's ragged form, taking in her uneven breaths. "Oh *no*!" she cried. "Tell me it ain't!"

Fluttershy only lowered herself to the ground and wept.

"...Rarity?" asked Applejack, barely able to speak.

The pegasus nodded in silence.

"NOOOO!!!" This wasn't fair! *It wasn't fair!!* NOW!? Those idiots, those

interdimensional idiots, had the whole WINTER to deliver that damned package! But they'd taken their sweet time, hadn't they? Applejack collapsed, heaving thick tears on Fluttershy's lawn. "No-o..."

"Rarity's dying," whispered Fluttershy.

Applejack gasped. Her head shot up. "Come again? *Dying?* Not dead?! *Dying??*"

Fluttershy looked up, eyes round. "Yes," she said, soft as a feather. "The doctor was just here—she said it was irreversible..."

"*Let me in!!*" shouted Applejack. She leapt for the door and banged it open, not waiting for Fluttershy. "Where is she??"

But she was on the settee, where she always was. Applejack fumbled with her bag. "Rarity..." she rasped.

Fluttershy hurried in behind. "What's happening??"

Applejack pushed a diamond-tipped glass instrument something like a thermometer into Rarity's mouth. The unicorn was non-responsive, but the instrument whirred. Five tiny symbols appeared in the glass circle at its base, ornate forms in brown, blue and green. Applejack threw a book onto the floor in front of Fluttershy while putting her own eye to the instrument. "Look these up! First—a lizard with a crown!"

Fluttershy gaped, but started to flip through the book, filled as it was with symbols and descriptions. "What color lizard?"

"Blue!" shouted Applejack.

"Um...what shade of bl—"

"Blue like a—blue like the part of a blue jay that's mixed with black in the middle of a wing—blue like a poison frog—blue like the sky at the horizon at dusk in the spring—blue like a far-off mountain covered in mist—blue like the blue in Dash's mane, or like one of Pinkie's eyes, but in the middle, not the top!"

"...Azure?" hazarded Fluttershy.

"Yes, AZURE, AZURE!!" Applejack would *never* forget that word so long as she lived.

"It's...it says it's a cockatrice king who once ruled the Nibion Keys. Applejack, what is this book? What is it telling us?"

"It's telling us WHO the royal bastard was who set that boobytrap and HOW we can fix it!!"

Fluttershy gasped with hope. She didn't ask how. She didn't waste time cheering with joy. All she said was, "The next symbol, please?"

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It was a trap, all right. A trap laid at the tomb of the king's spawn (cockatrices didn't have children, properly speaking), slain by a pony champion. The necklace was meant to slowly destroy the pony who would come looking to defile the tomb of this cockatrice prince and steal the riches buried with him. There was no telling how the box containing it had made it so far inland. Maybe it had been looted from the Keys long ago, taken many a league and lost again, and it was just Rarity's bad luck that she was the first *pony* to touch the thing, since the trap wouldn't have sprung for any other species. It didn't matter. All that mattered was getting their hooves on the gem's brass and nickel-iron casing—thank *heavens* they'd kept it—and chanting the words in the book while passing the big glimmering ring over it that had come in the kit—and *curse it*, they needed a unicorn, just a spark to consummate the spell! Why hadn't Applejack read the full instructions in advance??

"Rarity," said Fluttershy, shaking her soulmate's shoulders. "Rarity, I know you're almost gone, but we need one last favor from you before you can rest. Just one little spark for this magic ring. That's all we need."

Her voice was expertly pitched between cajoling and demanding.

Applejack admired the way she spoke, the way she grasped the unicorn between her forelegs...but even so, Rarity was unconscious and wasn't waking up, and Applejack thought desperately of running off to find a unicorn, any unicorn, for help...

...and now Fluttershy had slipped the ring around Rarity's horn, and was leaning forward to *kiss* her...

-BZZLAHMM!- There was a sizzling explosion! Applejack felt her cheek and jaw being scorched, she saw Fluttershy's hair being burned off her face, she wondered how a pony as weak as Rarity would ever survive a blast like that...

But it was Rarity gasping that she heard next, and her moans were more powerful than Fluttershy's, her body stirring. Applejack rose to her hooves and watched. Rarity's face was charred black, a big chunk missing from the front of her mane, but she was moving...and the color was back in her eyes.

"What in the world?!" she moaned. "Whatever *happened* to me? Applejack? Flutter, dearest? Has something gone wrong?"

"No," said Fluttershy, "her own face a mask of charcoal gray. "Something went very right."

Rarity raised her head and reflected; Applejack could see her thinking back. "I'm—you..." She smiled cautiously. "Am I *cured*?!"

"You tell us, sugarcube! Can you see all right?"

"Yes, yes! And I can think! And my joints are—and—" She concentrated, raising a compact mirror to her face with a shimmer of levitation magic, but dropped the mirror with a scream.

"...Your magic still hurts?" asked Fluttershy.

"My *magic* is fine," said Rarity. "But my *face*! And yours! What in Equestria? We need to get to the spa, stat!!"

"Ah reckon Zecora's place might be a better choice," remarked Applejack. Her lungs were liberated—her burden was lifted. She felt magical.

"Yes, I suppose that would be adequate," Rarity agreed. "Do you suppose the two of you might fill me in on the way?"

"Oh, Applejack was very strong," said Fluttershy. "She came racing over with a kit to lift your curse in the nick of time. But she still hasn't told me where she got it!"

"Pinkie's to thank, one way or another," pronounced Applejack. "Or maybe it was Rainbow, or Scootaloo. Or some other world's Twilight Sparkle. Who knows! All I know is, it came as a gift. The same Pinkie that took my last few Scootaloos away dropped it off like it was nothin'."

Rarity took in a huge, appreciative breath and walked out the still-open door. Applejack had the idea that if you didn't know who to thank, you thanked the whole, big, wonderful world at large. Well, that was plenty good enough for her.

Thank you.

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Farm life. Made possible by the land, the sun, the rain, the good and growing things of the earth, and who or whatever originally created them, far or near, as well as by the good grace of society.

Applejack was grateful for it all these days. She'd had her taste of providence from afar, and it had driven home just how little in the grand scheme of things she was able to control. But that made her precious acreage all the sweeter.

They weren't planting this year, and that gave them time for Twilight's new techniques. For the first time, AJ and Mac were grafting shoots from mature trees onto young ones, so that they could start producing faster. They'd stacked up the bales in the hay barn all the way to the ceiling so Twilight could use the other half for her 'lab'. A new barn was on the to-do list, but that could wait till budding season was over.

So far, AJ was picking up injection grafting pretty quickly, even if it did feel a little unkind to be tampering with the natural life cycle of her precious trees. Twilight was excited about it, and AJ didn't doubt she had good reason. She'd been tempted to rebuild her fifth wall viewer over the winter, but that was out of the picture now: According to Princess Celestia, there

was a multiversal accord forming, and the conclusion its leaders were forming was that the walls between worlds should be respected once again...for now. She'd send word when it was okay for Twilight to publish—until then, it was back to life as normal.

Except that with a pony like Twilight as your mate, things were never normal for long. Even as AJ learned to dip, pierce and wrap her grafts with speedy confidence, she knew the next adventure life threw at her wouldn't be far off.

She missed Pinkie and Dash, she really did. It gnawed at her heart sometimes to think of them. But they were happy, wherever they were—AJ knew that. They'd given up their home in order to save Rarity, and they'd stirred up a thousand messes in a thousand worlds and were no doubt living the adventure of a lifetime in some distant land. So long as they were getting what they deserved, AJ didn't feel like she'd really lost them.

Rarity's mane was growing back, and her and Fluttershy's faces were almost back to normal. Applejack couldn't keep herself from grinning whenever she saw them. They looked like members of a secret club, their singed facial hair telling the world they'd been through something together. If only it had been something as trivial as an explosion.

But they did seem happier for having gone through it all. Rarity was a mite less haughty these days...AJ figured she took her glamour and health less for granted. She still lived with Fluttershy in the cottage, but went up to the boutique most days, glad to work with customers again. Apple Bloom now occupied the bedroom that'd once been Rarity's, and AJ didn't doubt her resourceful little sister would be running the shop one day, if not opening her own somewhere.

For now, Spike was still at the farm, but he spent a good three days a week with Apple Bloom. AJ had helped her with the letter home about it. Ma and Pa hadn't been thrilled to hear who their little girl had taken up with, but they didn't object. They knew that youth went through phases and changes, anyhow, and there was no telling what the future held for this odd couple.

Dip, pierce, wax. Dip, pierce, wax. Make the future bright. Coax the apples into the sun. Feed the ponies, keep the town running. Work with

the seasons, work with the spring.

A funny thought popped into her head. Was there an Applejack somewhere whose cutie mark *wasn't* a set of ripe apples? Heh. AJ could hardly conceive of such a thing.

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"Question Ten. Does your mate question your business decisions?"

It was good, after a hard afternoon's work, to lie in the yard, lazily peeling and coring last year's surplus and munching liberally when the urge took you. The new issue of *Tarpan* was here, the scent of apple cake was in the air, the sun was bright, and life was sweet.

AJ lifted her head saucily. "You wouldn't be you if you didn't," she observed.

"Am I that bad?" asked Twilight.

"Twi, just last week you were givin' me grief over callin' my products 'applicious'. That ain't a reliable metric, you said. It ain't properly testable, you said."

"Well, it's true! Besides, I don't like the precedent it sets for a name like Owlicious."

"Well there's that, I s'pose. But on the whole, ah shouldn't complain. I mean this business is yours too, after all."

Twilight grinned. "You really mean that?"

"Course I do. The more involved you are, the better off we are as a family. That's why I look in on you at least twice a day—to make sure you don't get up to nothing too pernicious."

"Do you even know what pernicious means?" Twilight teased.

"Sure ah do." AJ tilted her head. "...It means perny an' delicious. Right?"

Twilight laughed. She was about to announce the next question when there was a sudden flash from the site of the former barn.

"Day one-nineteen, world fifty-*six* !" exclaimed a familiar, perky voice.
"Your turn Dashie—what's wrong with *this* one?"

"Uh...let's see. Gimme a minute."

AJ was on her feet in a second. Gaping. Was it...could it really be...?

Sure enough! Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie were standing there, not a furlong away, their backs loaded with packs and their flanks and rumps gussied up with exotic equipment. But were these the Dash and Pinkie they knew, or just another pair of roving travelers?

Dash looked from the farmhouse to the sky to Twilight and AJ, taking them in like they were scene dressing. "I, uh...um...huh! I don't know.
Everything kinda checks out."

"It does?" exclaimed Pinkie. "You're kidding." She sniffed the air and looked at the ground—and jumped. "Dashie! Look!"

"What?"

"The grass! See how it's not growing here? In this five-sided shape!?"

"Five-sid...The barn!!"

"Yes!! It's where the barn used to be!" Pinkie looked again at AJ, now seeing her anew with eyes full of wonder. "Applejack? Is that really you?
Are we *really* back?!"

"Pinkie!" yelled Applejack, rushing over. "Sugarcube!!" Twilight was right behind her, calling Dash's name.

"Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh," babbled Dash. "Is this really *home*?? We've been to so many worlds..." Her eyes gained harsh focus.
"Twilight. Do you remember the last thing I said to you?"

"Yes," said Twilight. "You said you hoped everypony would forgive you."

But I didn't know then you were planning on destroying my invention and AJ's barn and disappearing!"

"Oh my gosh, that's *right!* You *are* the real Twilight. We *are* home!!"

"WOOO-HOOO!!!" shouted Pinkie, confetti and streamers exploding from her back. "We've missed you *so much!!*" She hesitated. "We destroyed your machine? I didn't know that would happen."

Twilight nodded. "The Princess took what was left of it."

"Didn't stop us from getting' company, though," said AJ. "Over the winter, this here farmhouse put up more Scootaloos'n you could shake a stick at."

Dash snickered. "Oh my gosh, really? That kid is so funny! You have not *lived* until you've woken at four in the morning surrounded by fifty identical fillies begging you to show them how to do a Super Speed Strut."

"Well, we've still got one, and I'm sure she'll be burstin' at the seams when she hears you're back. Oh, Dash!" AJ gave her a tight hug. "No more zippin' off through the fifth wall, alright?"

"You got it!" said Dash, throwing her packs to the ground. "We've been trying to find this place for over a month! There's so many places out there that're almost right, but not quite...I thought we'd *never* get back."

Pinkie stood tensely, hair quivering. "Oh no, I just remembered! Did you get your Rarity kit?"

"Our...Oh, you mean the cure! Yes, yes, we did! She's hale as porridge! Did you send it?"

"Ehh, not exactly. I mean, at some point someone realized there were, like, fifty-something Rarities who got zapped by gems in their world, and not all of them had the stuff they needed to fix it, so that got bundled into the standard fixer-upper package."

"Fixer-upper package?" asked Twilight.

"Yeah! To take care of all the problems that made all those Pinkies and

Rainbows and Scootaloos go questing! You didn't think we were the only ones, did you?" Pinkie asked.

"No, but I kind of thought you were the first."

"Could be. There's like four other Pinkies and two Rainbows who think *they* were the first to spread the tech, so who knows? We're the only *couple* with that claim, though, as far as we know!"

"And that makes us the best!" Rainbow summed up. "So everything's doing great here?" She looked to Pinkie. "I think I know what this calls for!"

"A party?" squealed Pinkie. "Oh no! I just realized—I can't throw myself a welcome back party because I'm the one being welcomed back! And that just doesn't work!"

"Who says?" scoffed Rainbow. "If you want to throw your own welcome back party, go ahead and throw it! Who's gonna stop you?"

"Sure won't be me," said AJ. "For my part, I'll do my best t'make it one fer the ages." She raised her head and whooped through the window: "Granny Smith! Get them apple cakes ready for trav'lin', 'cause there's gonna be one bushwhacker of a party tonight!!"

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And there was. Pinkie spent years trying to top that party, but she never quite managed it. There was magic in the way everypony came together, excited beyond mere words to have their town's prodigal daughters back.

There were loaves of garlic bread, and carrot cake, and muffins, and punch, and root beer, and salt licks, and fancy crackers, and banana pudding, and strawberry shortcake, and do-it-yourself brownie sundaes, and tater tots, and pinatas, and hopscotch, and charades, and live music, and phonograph music, and Marco Polo, and regular polo, and competitive streamer wrapping, and non-competitive streamer dancing, and aerial gymnastics, and synchronized bouncing, and balloon volleyball, and one very, very happy Scootaloo.

It went on all through the night and well into the next day, and by the time

many of the guests had gone home and everyone else was tired, Pinkie and Rainbow were holding forth. They were standing on the stairs, telling anypony who would listen about how they'd started out their journey with different visions of the multiverse—Pinkie had relished the idea of a world exploding and exploding again in every direction, buzzing with infinite possibilities, while Rainbow had favored the concept of destiny—identifying the best, fastest path at all times and zooming like an arrow through the tunnel of life. As their love for each other had grown, of course, they'd come together, and now settled for the idea of riding the winds of the infinite explosion wherever it seemed their personal destiny meant to take them.

"If we've learned anything from all this," pointed out a woozy Twilight, "it's that the whole soulmate concept isn't true at all. Not that we don't form deep and meaningful bonds with the ones most important to us..." She glanced with a flushed smile in AJ's direction. "...but clearly, there's no one special pony that we're *meant* to be with. With the right circumstances and the right effort, we could end up happy with any number of different partners."

"Exactly!" said Pinkie. "And if you focus too much on one particular life...the life you just *happen* to be really living..."

"...you end up neglecting all the totally awesome *other* lives you could be living," finished Rainbow.

"And even if we can't live them all," said Fluttershy, "it's good to know that they're there."

"Hear, hear!" cried a ribbon-festooned Rarity, levitating her wine glass for a toast. Everyone gladly joined in.

"So what's next for Dashie Pie?" asked a sleep-deprived Spike, nursing a virgin dragonberry mojito. "Can I call you that? Dashie Pie?"

"Well now you've got to!" giggled Pinkie. "It's just too cute not to! And I figure the next step is for me to get my own place, which I should totally be able to afford once I've sold all the completely amazingly awesome magical technology I brought back from my trip! I'm serious—we're talking *self-baking gingerbread*, here!"

"Whereas I'm gonna hit the lecture circuit," said Dash, "and tell everyone about my adventures! That way when I'm a Wonderbolt someday, they'll know who I am!"

"And by the time you get back, continued Pinkie, "I should have *juuust* about enough balloons to lift my house into the sky, and then we can live together!"

"Forever!" exclaimed Dash.

"FOREVVVEERRRR!!!" keened Pinkie, rubbing her face in her lover's multicolored mane.

"And then," said Dash, "we're gonna adopt about fifty kids. We'll have one house on the ground for the ones who can't fly, and a big aerial sportsyard for the ones who can!"

"Fifty!" cried AJ. She hailed from a big family, but still. "Ain't that a bit much?"

"Believe me," replied Rainbow, "after what we've been through? That'll be nothing."

"What about me?" cried Scootaloo, emerging from a pile of exhausted foals in a play area. "Can I be one of them? I could really use a home."

"Scoots," grinned Rainbow, "I want you to be the first. We can practice raising kids with you! Get really good at it before we hit the big leagues."

Scootaloo practically exploded up the stairs to give Rainbow a hug. "I promise it'll be worth it! I *won't* let you down!"

There was a general sigh of tenderness. "So that's gonna be your life, huh?" summarized AJ. "One big, rambunctious family in the clouds?"

"Yyyep! But don't worry," said Pinkie Pie, whirling her tail. "If things ever get too boring, I'll whirr up the ol' randomizer I call my brain and come up with a *new* crazy idea! With so many possibilities out there, we'll *never* be bored!"

"Oh yeah?" challenged Dash swankily. "Prove it."

Pinkie grinned, gritting her teeth and puffing up her hair. Her eyes raced in their sockets and her tail spun with a rising hum, until—*click!* "I've got it!

Toaster music!! We could be professional toaster musicians. We'd collect all the toasters we could find and figure out what sounds they all make, and time them so they all pop up in harmony, and we could break dry pieces of toast for percussion, and scrape knives of jelly across them like *a-schick-a-schick-a-schick-a-schick*, and then we could pass out the toast to the audience afterward! We'd be breakfast sensations!!"

Dash first stared, then gaped happily, and finally nuzzled Pinkie with unbridled affection. "Pinkie Pie...you are so stochastic!"

"I know! And don't you just love me for it??"

Dash came up grinning brightly. "Are you kidding? It's the best thing about you!!"

Pinkie squealed with delight and threw herself at Dash.

It was all hugs and possibilities from there.

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Six ponies. Fifteen combinations.

Five alternate universes.

Infinite potential.

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# The End Of The Combinatorics Project

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