

The Somber Collection

Five Pony Oneshots

By Somber



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Blood, Sweat and Tears

Celestia lifted the sun slowly above the horizon, sending golden fingers across the green rows of apple trees and banishing the fading patches of night. Applejack stood on the porch of the Apple Acres as she did every morning enjoying a hot cup of apple cider and a honey oat muffin still warm from the oven. The sunlight struck her eyes, lighting them in a blaze of emerald fire as she looked on at the sun and the faint silhouette of the Princess. Finally she tugged her hat lower over her eyes as she smiled. The apples were full; she'd have to make a round to harvest some before they became windfalls. But not today. Not today.

"Got a lot of stuff to do before we head up there, eh Big Macintosh?" Applejack said as the large red pony stepped out with her into the spreading sunlight.

He bobbed his head once. "Ayup," was all he said before he tossed a muffin into his mouth and munched it down in one bite.

"Applejack?" Apple Bloom called from the kitchen. "Do you two want more muffins or should Granny and I clean up?"

"Make one more batch and we'll take it with us, sugar cube," Applejack replied as she took one more long slow breath. She could smell the morning wet and the cool air; the smell of Apple Bloom and Granny Smith handling the cooking in the kitchen, and felt the warmth of the sun. These were good moments. "Well, time to get to work."

* * *

"Momma, I don't wanna get up!" Applejack shouted from underneath her thick warm blankets.

"Macintosh is all ready up, sugar cube," her mother called from the doorway to her cramped little bedroom. "He's all ready eaten and getting ready to help. Ain't fair with you lying slugabed, now is it, Applejack?" Slowly the covers slipped down and the young Applejack peeked out at her

mother standing patiently in the doorway. Granny always said she had her momma's eyes and her daddy's smile.

"No Momma. T'aint fair," Applejack muttered as she crept slowly out of bed, leaving the sheets a rumpled mess around Mr. Carrot. The stuffed toy looked forlorn as she abandoned him to the warm and snuggly sheets.

"I swear Applejack, you couldn't make your bed to save your life," her momma said as she stepped aside to let her exit and head to the bathroom. With her face washed and morning duties addressed, she wiggled into the kitchen where Granny deftly maneuvered in the tiny one mare kitchen giving each pie and turnover its time in the oven without a second lost. Applejack gave a great yawn as her momma came up and nuzzled her. "Landsakes, Applejack. Is it really such trouble to run a brush through your mane a dozen times or so?"

"Yeah, cause that'd be twice as much as your momma does," Granny Smith quipped as she set a turnover, muffin, and glass of milk on the tiny breakfast table. "Don't be tellin the girl her mane's a mess when you've got a bird's nest yourself, Apple Blossom."

"All right. All right." The peach coated mare said with a soft chuckle as she picked her hat off the peg by the door and tossed it deftly atop her rumpled red head. "You eat up and then help us load. With some luck we might get these apples sold early." That meant a chance she'd actually get to play with the other fillies of Ponyville, so she devoured the contents of her plate as quickly as she could without choking.

The apple farm was only a few dozen apple trees around the small shack and a farm house that wasn't much bigger. It was hard work knocking the apples from the trees with sticks or poles with baskets on the end. The yellow hills surrounded their home was covered in long yellowing strands of grass broken by stones. It was land no pony wanted except for her parents; not even rock farmers wanted to roll stones up hills. The tiny green patch was the only of its kind between Ponyville and the Everfree Forest.

"Come on, Tulip!" Her daddy called from the apple cart as skinny Macintosh loaded up the last basket. Tulip, his name for her ever since Applejack ate momma's flower garden. The red stallion was all ready in his

harness as he smiled down at her easily. He always smiled. It didn't matter if it was blazing hot, freezing cold, or pouring rain; he always wore an easy smile. They loaded up all their apples for the week; almost enough to fill the wagon, and together they went into town.

Wading across the Equestrian River at its shallows, skinny little Macintosh had to get out and help mom and dad pull the wagon across. Still, muddy wet and at the market was better than muddy and wet. They opened up the back of the wagon and mom did the business as Macintosh loaded the bags of any pony with their purchases. Applejack stood in the wagon, calling out 'Fresh Apples, fresh off Sweet Apple Acre.' Daddy left to do daddy business.

After two hours Applejack began to get antsy. She knew they couldn't leave till they sold all they could, but the morning ponies had come and gone and it would be hours before lunch time. "Momma! Momma! Can I go, please?" She wasn't sure where, just as long as she could go somewhere that wasn't the farm or the wagon.

Her mom looked down at her with a soft sigh and smile. "All right, sugar cube. But don't go too far, all right Applejack?" Applejack gave a whoop and leaped from the back of the wagon to run for her life.

Applejack always found the town ponies odd; just about as odd as they found Applejack and her family. They didn't live on farms; didn't wake up early to pick apples, and seemed unduly fixated on keeping dirt to a minimum. The fillies her age didn't like running or wresting, and the colts just looked at her like she was some weird critter; like a filly pretending to be a colt. Still, she found exploring the town was often rewarding in and of itself.

She came across her daddy walking with Mr. Pie, the sober rock farmer who had a spread south of Ponyville. They were joined by a small green pony that seemed oddly crooked and pinched. He wore a black jacket and wore the funniest set of glasses pinched on the edge of his muzzle. "I'd love to help you, Appleseed. You know I would, but what you're talking about simply isn't possible."

"Mr. Pie's all ready agreed to help me with clearing the rock, Mr. Bags. All I need is the bank to loan me the money and in a few years we'll

be able to produce enough apples for half of Equestria,” her daddy said as he kept his sure smile. Mr. Pie gave the closest to a smile he did as he chewed on his corn pipe stem and gave a little nod.

Mr. Bags gave a slimy sort of smile. “Appleseed, I know you have big dreams for that little farm of yours, but let’s face it. It’s too big for you. You can’t do it.”

Now Applejack didn’t have an idea what they were talking about, but when she saw her daddy stop smiling she knew that a line had been crossed. She ran right up to Mr. Bags and shouted, “Don’t you tell him he can’t do it! My daddy’s the biggest, toughest, strongest pony in all of Equestria. No, in the whole world!” The three adults seemed quite taken back by the unexpected interruption. “So if he says he can do it, he’s gonna do it. No matter how big! It just takes work, right daddy?”

Her daddy’s big smile rained down on her. He looked fit to burst! “That’s right, Tulip.”

“Well, I didn’t expect you to have such a vocal advocate, Appleseed.” Mr. Bags didn’t seem to know quite how to respond. Finally he frowned sourly, “Fine. Fine. I’ll see about approving your loan. Your numbers may be ambitious, Appleseed. I hope you don’t choke on them.” He gave the two farmers a nod and walked off.

“I hope you know what you’re doing, Appleseed. What yer talking about’s ten times bigger than the plot you’re working now,” Mr. Pie said in his somber low voice. “That’s a mighty big debt yer taking.”

“Don’t you fret none. I’ll let you know when we start clearing the rocks and you can take your pick. Oh, and congratulations on the new filly. Your missus pick a name?”

“Pinkamina-Diane,” Mr. Pie said gravely, “after her mother.” Applejack’s father smiled, but if he thought the name as silly as Applejack did he kept it to himself.

After some more small talk, her daddy ducked his head and lifted her easily on to his back. He talked with Applejack a moment, and then they trotted back towards the market place where her mamma was selling two

bags to Mrs. Muffins. Her face turned concerned at the sight of both of them looking sad. "We didn't get the loan," she said softly, her smile now looking concerned.

"Afraid I didn't get it," her daddy said, before glancing up at Applejack and grinning.

"But I did!" Applejack proclaimed proudly, "Once I reminded that sour Mr. Bags my daddy's the biggest, strongest, toughest, hardworkingest pony around he coughed up those bits lickety split." She enjoyed quite a round of attention from her family as she stood proudly on his shoulders; even if she didn't quite understand what it was all about.

That afternoon, when the tired sun was all red and puffy and setting behind the Everfree Forest her momma sent her out to find daddy for supper. She peeked in the shed and then around the apples before she spotted him standing in the waist high yellow grass. Slowly she walked up behind him, looking up at that distant gaze in his eyes. "Daddy? Supper's almost done."

"All right, Tulip. I'll be right there," he said with his easy smile.

Applejack started to leave, but then paused. Had she kept walking, Celestia only knew what would have become of her. Instead she returned to his side. "Whatcha lookin at?"

"All the apple trees," he said as he smiled at the yellow grass swaying lazily in the afternoon breeze.

"But the apple trees are behind us, Daddy."

He looked down at her and knelt, scooping her on to his shoulders once more to look at the hills around their farm. "Those were just the start, Tulip. I was thinking we'd have some more over there. Then maybe some over there. Up there too. Rows and rows of apples as far as the eye can see."

Applejack leaned against her father's neck, folding her hooves as her green eyes widened. "I think I can see it too!" She imagined them sprouting from the yellow grass one after another, fully grown. Red, green,

and golden apples hung from them like candies, glowing in the afternoon sun. "And there's a barn there! And the house is there! And there are cows and chickens and pigs!" She suddenly frowned, "Daddy, do ponies keep pigs?"

"Well, we keep messy fillies that can't make their beds, so I don't see why not," he chuckled.

The excited dream faded though as she looked down at him. "But... can we do it, Daddy?"

He knelt down and she hopped off him to watch as he tore out a clod of grass. "Look here, Tulip." He said as he pawed at the dark soil beneath the grass. "Smell that?" She closed her eyes and took a deep sniff of the moist dirt. "This land's been sitting here forever. The ground's as happy to grow apples as grow grass. It's just up to us to make it happen."

"It's gonna take a lot of work, isn't it, Daddy?"

"It'll take a lot of blood, sweat and tears, Tulip, but I'll let you in on a secret: anything worthwhile does." They stood together, looking at the grassy hills and admiring all the apple trees until well past supper. But it was worth it.

* * *

"Not right now, Pinkie Pie." Applejack said firmly as she saw to putting out fresh hay for all the cows.

"But I know you're doing something, Applejack. If it's not a party then what?" Pinkie Pie said as she bounced on her hooves inside the cow barn. "Oooh... is it a game? I love games! What are the rules? Can I be blue?"

"Pinkie Pie!" Applejack shouted, snapping the pink pony out of her excitement. She stared into her blue eyes, noting the concern and made herself relax. "Listen, Pinkie Pie. I'd like ya to ask all our friends here at noon. It's not a party though. If they can't make it, it's all right. Okay, Pinkie Pie?" She could tell from Pinkie's expression she'd need more. Applejack sighed, "It's a farm thing."

Pinkie Pie gave a long low 'ohhh' of comprehension. "A farm thing, I gotcha. I'll tell every pony not to come up here for party things." Pinkie Pie cocked her head and asked in concern, "This isn't gonna end up with you making baked bads, is it?"

You give a few dozen ponies food poisoning and that's all they ever remember. "It ain't. I promise."

"Okie dokie lokie. But when you're all done working, come and play with us, okay AJ?" Pinkie Pie asked with a smaller smile. A true Pinkie smile she reserved only for when she really really wanted something. "No pony should just work. You need to have fun too."

* * *

"That pony hates having fun. All she ever does is work," her classmates said as school let out. Groups of friends trotted off to have their fun while Applejack sat in her desk and kept working. Mr. Clover glanced up every now and then as Applejack finished the homework that' been assigned.

"Everything okay, Applejack? You look a little frazzled," the elderly green colt said as he adjusted his glasses.

Even his soft voice made her jump a little. "Oh, I'm sorry Mr. Clover. Macintosh and me are busting our rumps helping Daddy clear the fourth acre. And dig the well. And there's the apples to take care of too." She looked at the homework, "There's so much going on that if I don't get this here homework done now I'm liable ta forget."

He stood and walked to her desk, putting his hoof on the cutie mark worksheet they'd been assigned, "Don't worry about it, Applejack. I think I can give you a pass on this."

She shook her head firmly, "Nothin doin, Mr. Clover. Daddy says anything worthwhile takes work, and that includes schoolin." He chuckled softly and removed his hoof, letting her finish.

"I'm sure you did just fine, Applejack." Though he did seem to wince at her spelling and writing.

She trotted towards home when she came across a group of her classmates talking in low voices and looking at her with snide looks. Finally some decision was made when they broke and stepped in her path. "Oh Applejack," drawled the leader with a bright smile, "I was wondering if you wanted to come to my cutecinera tonight. There's going to be cake and prizes and music and stuff."

"Ah... I don't think I can make it, Meadowlark," Applejack said with a little forced smile. "But thank you for the kind offer." Some of her friends began to snicker. "What? What's so funny?"

"I told you she'd fall for it. Ten bits," she said to a frowning friend before the green pony gave her a snide smile. "You really think I'd want you to come to my party? What do you think you'd do? Tell us all about raising chickens? A hayseed like you is always good for a laugh."

"Ah ain't no hayseed!" Applejack said, scowling at her. "I get just fine marks."

"Oh yeah. Where's Manehattan? What the difference between zebras and ponies? Can you even add two plus two?" Meadowlark taunted.

"I'm pretty sure it equals a thumped flank!" And Applejack showed her answer. Unfortunately when she got home Momma and Daddy were plenty furious with her for bucking another filly, even if she had deserved it. The problem was that she didn't feel any better for it. She kept on thinking about what she had said.

"I tain't happy at all. All I do is work and work and there ain't any fun here. Meadowlark aside, there's gotta be more ta life than diggin in the dirt," she said sharply to her mother that night as they cleaned up supper.

"We have fun, Applejack. It's not as bad as that," her momma said as she washed and handed the plates to Applejack to dry. "Look at all the hard work your Daddy and Macintosh are getting done." Through the window they could see row after row of young trees spreading out to the south. Whatever rocks Mr. Pie hadn't taken were now piled up in a long

low wall around the property. Still, there was more hill and grass than apple farm.

“Well it’s his stupid dream,” Applejack said softly, “not mine.”

“Applejack!” Her mother used the rare tone for when she was in real hot water. “Your daddy’s dream is not stupid. He’s one of the few ponies I know that actually has a dream and wants to make it come true.”

“But do I gotta work and sweat for his dream? Meadowlark was right. I am a hayseed! I don’t know nothing besides Ponyville and farmin.” Applejack said as she sat down in a huff. Apple Blossom’s face softened a little and her momma brushed Applejack’s mane out of her face.

“There’s plenty in this world besides Apple Acres,” she said softly with a gentle smile. “Would you like to see some of it? You could go visit your Auntie Orange in Manehattan. Find yourself a dream of your own.”

Applejack’s eyes widened at the thought. It was like standing with her daddy seeing trees pop up in her imagination. “I could do that?” When her momma nodded Applejack whooped, “This is great. Maybe I’ll get my cutie mark there too!”

“I’ll call my sister Orange Blossom and make the arrangements,” her momma said, and then suddenly winced. “Ow!”

“Huh? What’s wrong, momma?”

Apple Blossom rubbed her swollen belly tenderly, “Looks like your baby sister wants to come along and get her mark too.”

* * *

Applejack carefully rolled the metal milk containers into the corner to let the creme separate. There’d be time for churning it into butter afterwards. “Thank you, ladies. I hope you enjoy your hay.”

“Oooh we surely will,” Bessy said as she gave Applejack a happy little smile, but worry tinged her large brown eyes, “But are you sure you’re okay, Applejack? You seem a bit moooody.”

"It's all right Bessy. It's just today. Don't ya'll worry yerselves none," she said softly as she lifted the milk contains to sit upright. "I'll check in on ya'll tonight."

"Oh she is such a nice pony, dontcha know?" Buttercup said to Bessy, "Such a hard worker."

Applejack just smiled as she scooted the heavy cans closer together, "I gotta be. I got a dream ta take care of."

* * *

Applejack coughed as she dumped the slops into the trough, coughing and waving her hoof in front of her face as she gagged from the stench. She stepped back and pulled open a door, letting in the two pigs that had moved in to the farm. "Garrrrrbage! Yeaaaaaahhh!" they cheered as they charged and tucked into the slop with abandon.

"Ya'll are welcome," she yelled over the din of their frantic eating. It didn't seem like what they ate mattered as much as eating in general, and unpleasant as it might be, what came out the other side made for a dandy fertilizer.

"Oy, AppleJ!" Ralph called out, talking around the mush as he chewed. "Where are your folks?"

Bob poked his head up as he devoured some nasty apples, "Yeah, I haven't seen em in... like... forever! Oink!"

"Oh they went out west with some of the family. There's a spot they're thinking of making a town. Appleloosa." Applejack said as she hung the buckets on pegs jutting from the wall. "They'll be back tonight!"

"Think they'll have garbage?" Ralph asked as he devoured some mouldy cheese?

"Course they'll have garbage, Ralph. Don't be a noodle!"

“Who you callin a noodle, noodle?” Ralph scowled, and then his eyes lit up. “Oooh! Noodles!”

And that was why pigs would never take over the world.

Applejack made her way towards the farmhouse, with Wynona, her collie pup, leaping around her heels. With the new baby Apple Bloom Daddy had expanded on the farmhouse just before he and Momma had left. Applejack had to admit it was pretty nice to have her own room again. Not that she minded handing over Mr. Carrot to Apple Bloom. Now that she'd been to Manehattan and returned with her cutie mark, she had to admit she'd been crazy to ever want to leave this place. Let them call her a hayseed. If it meant she could be here, then she'd be a hayseed.

She made her way towards the house as the sun slowly descended behind the hills. Wynona barked and snapped at flies, dustmotes, or anything else her canine brain imagined. For the first time, Applejack could see the outlines of her father's dream with her eyes open. There were still plenty of apple trees needing planting, but the trees on the south quarter were starting to blossom. This fall they'd have their first go at the new crop. Of course in the meantime they'd need to put up a proper roof on the barn and dig a few wells for the new sprouts.

She cooked a fine welcome home dinner which Macintosh complicated by eating almost half of everything that came out of the oven. He was just growing like crazy! Granny Smith rocked with little Apple Bloom in her hooves, letting her drink off her bottle. Outside the light turned from gold to red, and red to purple. The food on the table grew cold and stale. Certainly they were late. Probably got side tracked by some apple trees. Stopped to visit some friends in Ponyville. By the time the moon came out, no pony at the table was coming up with suggestions.

Hoof beats on the trail to the house; not Momma's or Daddy's. All eyes on the door. Hoofs clattering on the porch. Then silence. Terrible silence. The door opened slowly and her cousin Braeburn looked in at the four of them gathered around the table. No pony seemed able to speak for the longest time. “What is it, Braeburn?” Applejack asked as her eyes grew round. “Where's Momma and Daddy?”

It had been a landslide in a canyon. A dozens ponies had been hurt, but two had been hurt bad. Really bad. They approached the house in Ponyville and Applejack saw all her cousins, uncles, and aunts who had gone on the trip just looking. Looking. The only smiles in sight were grimaces; fearful things that melted when you looked at them too long.

The brown unicorn, Dr. Birch, met them at the entrance. Momma and Daddy weren't in any pain. That was it. No pain. With that he tipped his hat solemnly to the pair and quietly left the house. Daddy wanted to see Macintosh. Momma asked for Applejack. For the longest time it seemed Applejack hesitated. The sounds of a clock in the hall ticked softly along till she clenched her eyes and stepped in.

"There's my sugar cube," Apple Blossom said softly from the bed. A blanket covered her, but no blanket could hide that coppery smell that filled the room. "Afraid I can't give you a hug, Applejack." She said quietly as she stretched a hoof towards Applejack. Orange hooves took the peach appendage and Applejack stroked her cheek. It was so hot, like a pie fresh out of the oven.

"I just wanted to tell you how proud I am of you. You're growing up big and strong and beautiful. So beautiful," she said softly.

"I tain't..." Applejack whispered, looking away. Her mother gently turned her to look into her eyes.

"Trust yer momma. Ya are. And I can only hope that someday you meet a beau that can appreciate and handle a firecracker like my girl." Apple Blossom shook as she drew a slow raspy breath. "And I wanted ta tell ya I'm sorry. I know it wasn't easy living out here. I know there wasn't much time for fun and friends."

"No... no momma..."

"Hush, sugar cube. Someday, do your momma a favor. Find yerself some friends. A lonely life tain't no life at t'all." She trembled again and took a shallower breath. "Now, promise me you'll keep Apple Bloom safe and give yer momma a kiss." Applejack gently lowered her muzzle and kissed her softly on the tip of her nose.

"I promise," she swore softly.

"Attagirl," She stretched her hoof to the headboard where her cowboy hat rested. Her hoof raised it and held it out. Applejack swallowed and lowered her head. Gently it was placed atop Applejack's mane. A little straightening and her momma closed her eyes as she said, "Now I need to say a word or two to your brother and sister. Could you be a dear and send them in?"

Applejack nodded and gave her hoof one last squeeze. She didn't want to let it go, but she did what she was told. She stepped out, seeing Granny holding little Apple Bloom. Macintosh stood against the wall, head raised as tears streaked down his cheeks. It was the only time she could remember seeing him cry. She couldn't say it. She didn't need to say it. Without a word, as if this had all been rehearsed, they swapped rooms.

Inside her father lay with pink starting to show through the sheets pulled over him. His back was to her as she approached. Slowly she stretched a hoof out, pressing softly against his shoulder. He turned his head, looking up with such calm eyes. Still, his smile was as clear and steady as ever. "Well hello there, Tulip. Sorry, but I think I made a mess of things for you."

Applejack slowly walked around to face him and sat besides the bed, feeling her start to shake, "T'aint yer fault, Daddy. Stupid rocks. Stupid canyon."

"And stupid me for bein caught between em," he said with a chuckle and turned into a cough. Applejack tried not to be sick at the flecks of blood he left on the pillow. "And how's the farm?"

"I... I got them pigs settled in like you said. And we'll finish the barn... and the apples... and... and everything!" She stammered as she felt her throat start to close and her eyes burn. "I'll take care of your dream, daddy! I'll make sure it's be biggest and bestest apple farm in the whole wide world."

"Shhhh." He said as he put his hoof to her mouth gently. "That was never my dream, Tulip. Having the biggest apple farm for miles was a fine thing, I reckon, but it's not what I really wanted. My dream was to have a

happy wife and good children. And I got my dream. I got more of my dream than any pony right deserves to.” He coughed again, harder, speckling his pillow even more.

“Daddy, please...” Applejack could feel everything inside her tearing apart. She tried to be like Macintosh, but she couldn’t as that choking sensation grew. She let out a sob. “I don’t wanna lose you, Daddy. Please.”

“I love you, Tulip. Ya ain’t gonna lose me or your momma. Not really, so long as ya remember that.” His breathing became slower and wetter sounding. “Do me a favor, Tulip. Find your dream. On the farm or off, it don’t matter, so long as it’s your dream and no pony else’s.” His voice was barely above a whisper as he smiled up at her and said, “Might take a lotta blood, sweat, and tears, but...” He broke off with more coughing.

Applejack could barely speak as well, “But anything worthwhile does...”

He looked up at her for the longest time with his easy smile. Slowly his eyes close as he took one soft last breath. “Blossom...” he whispered in a breath that didn’t stop so much as fade. His body gave the slightest motion as it relaxed. From the other room rose her sister’s wail and Applejack pressed her face to her daddy’s hoof as all the tears in the world broke loose at once.

He never stopped smiling.

* * *

“Applejack?” came Big Macintosh’s voice from the barn door as she hung her head and felt the hot liquid trickle to earth. Their eyes met, her with her momma’s hat atop her head and him wearing daddy’s harness. Little reminders. “Take your time,” he replied calmly as he turned away to give her some privacy, as he always did.

“No. No. It’s alright. It’s silly. Haven’t bawled like this for years. Dunno why I’m blubberin like a leaky wellhead now,” she said as she gave a snotty sniff and scrubbed them away with her hoof. Big Macintosh just

stood there looking on. There wasn't anything but calm understanding on his soulful features. He was like the earth, always holding her up no matter how unsteady her walk became. "There. All gone," she said with a sniff and forced smile, "Everything ready?"

He gave a long slow nod and said, "Ayep."

"Seen any pony else?" Applejack looked towards Ponyville. She hadn't said they had to come, or that she needed them to come, but it would have been nice.

"Anope."

"Well then, let's get a move on."

* * *

Applejack had never been happier to live on a farm where there was a thousand things to do in a day. It let her forget about everything and find solace in the tedium of simply running a farm. The funeral had been absolutely horrible with seeming every pony in Ponyville coming by to offer their condolences. Finally she just wanted to kick them. They weren't giving her condolences. These were reminders. Little 'by the by, Applejack, in case ya forgot, yer folks are dead.' With every apologetic look and sad smile.

The worst had been when that white flanked unicorn filly from the tailor had stopped by and dared say that she'd been lucky- Lucky! Because she got to say goodbye. At that point Applejack had given her a buck to rival the one Meadowlark had received; not because that uppity unicorn had been wrong but because she'd been right. Then Applejack went back to the farm and focused everything on working. She did her chores, and Macintosh's too. She worked till her hooves were numb and she didn't so much sleep as pass out.

Granny Smith hadn't taken it easy either. The old mare occasionally called Macintosh after Daddy, Applejack after Momma, and Apple Bloom as Applejack. Yelling didn't help any, it only upset Apple Bloom. And everything upset Apple Bloom. It was as if the foal hadn't quite figured out

that no matter how she bawled her Momma wasn't coming to hold her and tell her it'd be all right.

When she spotted the two crooked looking ponies in their black wool jackets and funny glasses she at once pegged them as more well wishers, though most of those had trickled off by now. Friends of friends of the family? One of them seemed familiar. Then she recognized them: Mr. Bags and Mr. Sack from the Ponyville bank!

"What do you want?" she asked them sharply, in no mood to be hospitable.

"Ah, Miss Applejack. We've come to offer our condolences to-" Mr. Bags began as he took off his bowler hat simultaneously with Mr. Sack, looking sympathetic. Bags was trying to look sad at least. Trying badly.

"Thank ya kindly, Mr. Bags. Mr. Sack." She cut them off, "Now if you don't mind, I have work to do."

"Ah. Well," Mr. Sack seemed slightly put off, but Mr. Bags simply returned his hat atop his head.

"Well due to the long relationship Ponyville bank has had with your parents, we thought we would present this offer," Mr. Bags said crisply, all mournful attitudes lost as he fished out a parchment scroll from his jacket pocket and handed it to her.

"What's this?" Applejack asked as her hooves slowly unwound the parchment. There were a whole lot of fancy words and a big number. "Offer of purchase? What are ya buying?"

"Why, Sweet Apple Acres," Mr. Sack said, trying to sound nice.

"My daddy's farm is not for sale, Mr. Bags!" she snapped and threw the paper in his face. He blocked it with a smile.

"Please, Miss Applejack. Be reasonable. Your father owed the bank a substantial debt and he was barely making payments as is. This sum is enough to cover that debt and leave you and your siblings enough bits for a

comfortable lifestyle,” Mr. Sack said as the green unicorn rubbed his foreleg with some embarrassment.

“I ain’t sellin,” Applejack said firmly.

“Told you,” Mr. Bags said to his partner as the green earth pony looked coolly back at Applejack. “Well we’ll be back next month with another offer.”

“I don’t care how much more ya offer, I’m still not selling!”

“Oh no, you misunderstand, Miss Applejack,” Mr. Bags said with his wicked little smirk. “Our next offer is going to be half this one. And the next will be half of that. After that we’ll offer you enough bits to be able to haul whatever trash you want to take with you. And then we’ll simply take the farm.”

“You... you can’t!” Applejack gasped.

“We can. We have. I like to call it easy money,” Mr. Bags said as he flicked the scroll back at her with a snort. “In light of that, perhaps you’ll consider our offer a little more seriously.” He nodded and started to walk away towards Ponyville. Then he stopped and turned to kick one of the trees hard. He knocked one free and caught it easily in his mouth. Chewing with relish he laughed, “Delicious. Your daddy certainly knew how to grow them.”

“That’ll be two bits,” Applejack spat at him. He looked and gave a slow roll of his eyes before shaking two gold coins into the dirt.

“Be thankful that I don’t insist on a receipt. Come along, Mr. Sacks,” he said with a snort. The green unicorn’s mouth worked before he gave an awkward nod to Applejack and quietly follow in his partner’s hoof steps.

When they were out of sight she slowly sank to her haunches. The dirt had smudged the fine writing on the offer, but she could still see that number and hear the possibilities hissing in her ear. She’d been to Manehattan. She knew money like this would make for an easy life, especially in Ponyville. She could move there. Have a life like she’d

always imagined and let some pony else take on the burden of Sweet Apple Acres.

She pressed her hooves to the paper, twisting them in the dirt and smudging the writing even further. Easy money. Easy. Nothing worthwhile ever came from being easy. With a twist of her hooves the parchment shredded underneath them.

* * *

It was an odd little procession through the orchard. There wasn't a one of them who hadn't come through Sweet Apple Acres, but never like this. There was a solemnity to it as Applejack took the lead, then Granny Smith and Apple Bloom, with Big Macintosh bringing up the rear. Wynona barked enthusiastically as she raced around and ignored the mood of the others. It was all right though. Something to smile about was welcome.

Suddenly a very familiar purple Unicorn stepped out in front of the procession. "Twilight? Ya made it," Applejack murmured with a growing smile. One by one the rest of her friends emerged. Applejack's smile grew as she looked on a certain pink equine packing party balloons and streamers, "Pinkie Pie! I told ya ..."

"I know," Pinkie Pie said blithely. "But this isn't for your secret special not a party meeting with your friends thing. This is for my 'what a coincidence I'm throwing a party exactly where Applejack isn't throwing a party' party. I mean it's not like I'm Princess Pinkie Pie... though if I was I could totally order you throw an amazing wonderful stupendous party!"

Applejack blinked, and then she chuckled and shook her head.

Rarity stepped forward, "And as soon as I found out, I mentioned it to Sweetie Belle." From behind the elegant Unicorn stepped Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo, both young fillies giving Apple Bloom a nervous smile and wave.

"I don't know what's going on, AJ," Twilight Sparkle said softly. "But if it's really important then we want to come with you."

“Thank you, Twilight. Y’all have every right to come along. Not sure if it’ll mean as much to y’all as it will to us,” she gave a sure smile, “but yer my friends.”

* * *

Applejack sat alone at the table, looking down at the stacks of parchment in the wan light of a single candle. In reality, only two mattered. On the left was Mr. Bags’ last offer. It wasn’t even a tenth of what he’d originally offered, but still enough for a new life. On the right was a notice: a hundred bushels of apples or an equivalent amount of bits by morning or the bank would seize the farm. She’d stared at the two papers for hours, as if hoping some magic would change the damning numbers. Even if they worked through the night knocking fruit off with poles and baskets, they’d still never get the amount in time. They’d been working for weeks and only had ten bushels of apples ready.

“Applejack,” came Macintosh’s voice from the doorway, making her jump. He’d gotten big over the last few months. Almost as big as Daddy now. They’d have to start calling him Big Macintosh soon.

“It’s my fault,” Applejack said softly as she closed her eyes. “We’re gonna lose everything, and it’s my fault.”

“How you figger that, Applejack?” he asked in his slow, thoughtful voice.

Her hoof smacked the table hard. “Cause I was the one who thought I could run Apple Acres. That I could do a good enough job that we could pay off the loan and keep the farm. If I’d taken their offer... any of em...”

“We’d still have lost,” Big Macintosh said quietly. Applejack clenched her eyes shut, wishing she could do the same for her ears. Then he felt his hoof across her shoulders. “Applejack, we can walk away.”

“How can you say that?” Applejack pushed his hoof away, standing and facing him. “You know what this place meant to them! This was their dream!” *A happy wife and good children...*

“Even if it was, that dream ended with them.” Big Macintosh said softly. “Applejack, what is this place to you?”

Applejack wanted to scoff and tell him exactly what it was, but every time she started words failed her. And Big Macintosh just looked on with his doleful eyes waiting patiently for her to answer. She turned and looked out the window. The moon turned all the apple trees to ivory. Was this really just a place she clung to because of how much it matter to her parents? A last little reminder that once she’d been loved more than she deserved by two ponies now gone? No, it wasn’t that. Not just that.

“It’s my home, Macintosh. It’s the only place in the world I really want to be. I look at this place and see everything we’ve made... made with our own sweat, blood, and tears... and to think it’s all going to be taken because of a piece of paper. It’s not right! But I can’t think of any way to make the payment. Not now.” She sighed as she turned, pressed her back to the wall, and slid to the floor. “What is it to you, Big Macintosh?”

Big Macintosh looked out the window, his voice low as the evening breeze as he spoke, “A house. Apple trees. Barn. Half a water tower. And a lot of happy memories.” Then he looked down at her and gave a small smile. “And it’s my sister’s home. The only place she wants to be. So it’s where I want to be too.”

“My home? But Macintosh... it’s your home too!” Applejack said with her eyes wide. “Isn’t it?”

He gave a little shrug with his easy smile. “I reckon. But one day I’ll meet the right mare and I’ll go and make my own home with her. But you, Applejack? If this is your home, then there ain’t nothing that can stop ya from stayin.”

She slowly looked up at him. “Really?”

“Do you know what Daddy told me? He told me that, no matter what, I should trust you. That when you care for something, you care for it one hundred percent. That you won’t let anything stop you. I still believe that.” He said softly as he waved at the papers on the table. “You won’t let paper keep you from what you really want.”

He stood and walked quietly from the room. Applejack gave one last look at the pair of papers and sighed before blowing out the candle. Rather than returning to her room she stepped outside and started to walk quietly among the trees. The moon lit the apple orchard like a thousand candles and she had no trouble picking her way along the rows. "There's where the water tower was supposed to go. And the windmill. An apple cellar under the barn." There was so much that wasn't done. She wasn't finished!

Her hooves reached out to touch the oldest trees of all. The wood was knotted and cool beneath them. "Your dream was a family, Daddy. But I think that Sweet Apple Acres was always my dream. You were always there to help it along. Get it started. Then you left it up to me to finish. And I want to finish it. I want to make it the best farm in all of Equestria. I don't care how much hard work it takes." Then she smiled as she felt the weight lift as she reached out and touched one of the trees with her hoof.

A breeze rustled the leaves overhead. It ain't a dream, the night breeze seemed to say. What if she left? Did that mean her dream was left behind as well? Or could it be that she could take it with her to some place new? It wouldn't be Apple Acres. It would be smaller, but it could still be her dream.

"Maybe this is where my dream started, but it doesn't have to end here. No matter what the bank does, I'll make some little patch of earth my own. And if it's not the biggest apple farm in Equestria, it'll still be mine. My home..." she said as she felt the strong wood beneath her hooves, like her daddy's shoulders.

"Still... the thought of that lousy Mr. Bags getting his hooves on it..." she snorted and kicked the tree with a solid thunk that shook the leaves.

A single apple fell from the tree and landed right on her head! She winced, then looked down at it. Slowly her eyes were drawn upwards, then back at the trunk she'd just kicked. Carefully she lined herself up, reared back, and kicked the trunk as hard as she could. Pain lanced up her legs from the impact, but she was rewarded in a second by a veritable rain of apples. She looked at the trees and a wild smile crossed her face. "Macintosh!" she yelled at the house.

In the moonlight, Applejack went from tree to tree, kicking each as sharply as she could to knock the ripest apples from the branches and into their harvest baskets. Granny Smith and Apple Bloom came out to gather any that missed the wicker baskets and place them within. Big Macintosh hefted the baskets and hauled them to the barn one after the next.

After ten trees, her legs throbbed and her back ached. After twenty her bruised hooves made every step throb with pain. After thirty even her front legs were sore, and yet she couldn't give up. Big Macintosh tried the kick, but he didn't quite have the knack. He nearly busted a leg while dropping only a dozen apples. It was up to Applejack, and she knew it. Forty trees and each kick left smears of blood on the branches. By fifty, she was gritting her teeth as tears of pain rolled down her cheeks.

It had to get done. She had to do it. Not for Apple Acres or her daddy, but for herself. If this is your home there ain't nothing that'll stop ya! Kick. Run to the next. Set. Kick. Walk to the next. Set. Kick! Limp to the next. Set. Kick! At the end she was leaning against Big Macintosh to reach the next.

She made her hundredth kick just as Celestia brought the sun over the horizon. The bankers must have been waiting nearby for this moment as they came trotting towards the barn. Big Macintosh carried her out on his back, her hooves split and bleeding as she drooped in exhaustion over his back. Sweet Celestia she hurt, but nothing would make her stop smiling. Even if they hadn't gathered enough and they had to go stay with her cousins, she'd still be smiling.

Mr. Sack ran to her, looking in concern, "Miss Applejack! We need to get you to a doctor!"

"Nothin doin'," Applejack panted as she pointed at the baskets with a blood tipped hoof. "Mr. Sack, I got my payment for the bank right here!"

The two green ponies looked at the baskets in the growing light, jaws dropping. "How? It should have taken weeks for two of you to harvest so much!" Mr. Bags said in outrage.

"You don't know me or my family, do ya Mr. Bags?" Applejack said, grinning despite the burning pain in her hooves. "I told ya once. My daddy

was the biggest, toughest, strongest pony in all of Equestria. Me, I'm just the toughest, orneriest, most dedicated pony in Equestria. And it doesn't matter if I gotta work my hooves to the nubs. I'm keeping my dream."

"I'll send some workers to pick it up," Mr. Sack said in an impressed tone. "I've no clue how you harvested so many by yourselves, but this will more than cover your payment this year, won't it Mr. Bags?"

"This year," he said with a glower. "You're half dead, Miss Applejack. There's no way you'll make it next year."

She chuckled as she grinned in exhaustion. "Buckaroo, you just wait. We made it this year. We'll make it next year. We'll make it every year. Cause this is my home and my dream. I worked for it with blood, sweat, and tears. No piece of paper from a slimy easy money pony like you is gonna take that from me."

When the two left, Big Macintosh nudged her gently, "You gonna be okay, Applejack?"

"I reckon I'm gonna be off my hooves for a bit. Like all winter. Gotta find just the right kick ta buck em all off without bustin my legs." Applejack looked thoughtfully at the trees.

"'Applebuckin.' I like that," Big Macintosh said with his confident smile.

* * *

They'd reached the tallest hill on the farm. There weren't the same rows of trees that covered every square bit of land beneath them. A crown of long yellow grass blew softly in the wind. Two apple trees stood at the tip of the hill. They'd never be harvested like the rest of the trees. The one on the left was still covered in sweet smelling apple blossoms despite the fact that the year had passed well beyond the time for blooming. The tree on the right was surrounded by dozens of wild purple tulips. The branches of the two trees twisted one against the other, as if both were embracing with their strong branches.

Big Macintosh unloaded the snacks they'd prepared. They hadn't planned on feeding so many, but it didn't seem like too many were fussed by it. The Cutie Mark Crusaders seemed to be trying for a wrestling cutie mark, or maybe they were just being young. Big Macintosh sat with Spike talking guy stuff. Granny seemed intent on lecturing a rock on the rudeness of not speaking back to ones elders. The rest of her friends enjoyed the warm sunshine and cool breeze.

"So what's going on, Applejack?" Twilight asked as she looked up at the orange work horse.

Applejack sighed as she sat and pulled off her hat. "Y'all probably don't know it, but the bank in Ponyville's been trying ta get their hooves on Sweet Apple Acres for years now. Tried to get me to sell plenty of times," she reached in to the hat and pulled out and scroll, opening it up. "This here is their latest. They're offerin almost a million bits for this place." She passed the scroll around, "It's also gonna be their last."

"What? You're *selling* Sweet Apple Acres?" gasped Rainbow Dash.

"Shoot, no. Simmer down, Sally," Applejack said with a smile. "It's going to be the last because of this." And she pulled out a second scroll. "When I was a filly, my daddy borrowed a heap of bits to buy these hills put in all the apple trees ya'll can see. He had a dream of havin a family. Big Macintosh, Apple Bloom, Granny Smith, and myself were all a part of that dream. I guess it was only fitting that as part of his dream, his work would be part of my dream," She looked out at all the trees and with a distant, wistful look, "T'was a lot of hard work. I came within a hoof's edge of acceptin the bank's offer or losin the farm. Nearly worked myself to death that night applebuckin for the first time. But we kept it. We made next year's payment, and the year after that. And now, today..." she pulled out a second scroll.

Most of the fancy wording was difficult to make out, but no one could miss the enormous words 'Mortgage' and 'Paid in Full' stamped on the front. She handed it over to Spike, "Care to do me the honors of lighting this critter up?"

"Sure!" He climbed off Twilight Sparkle and took a deep breath.

“And don’t send it to the Princess!” Twilight Sparkle interjected. Spike gave her a flat look and then blew a little green ball of fire that crackled at the corner and quickly spread. Applejack let it go as the last bits burned away. The breeze swirled the flecks of gray ash around the intertwined trees before disappearing into the sky.

A cheer went up from all the assembled ponies. It was clear some had no clue what it really meant, but that didn’t change the enthusiasm every pony shared. Afterwards, as things wound down and ponies started to drift away for their own lives, Twilight Sparkle trotted up to where Applejack reclined in the nestling gap between the intertwining trees. “Thank you for letting us be here, Applejack. This was all so amazing. You finally got your dream.”

Applejack pushed the brim of her hat back, chewing on a tulip with the purple tip hanging out. “You mean owning Sweet Apple Acres? Shoot, that wasn’t my dream. No more than it was my daddy’s.”

Twilight Sparkle gave a confused little smile, “It’s not... but I thought...”

“Sweet Apple Acres is a fine and dandy farm, Twilight Sparkle, and I’m glad I’m a part of it, but it’s just a farm. I could have had my dream with a little vegetable garden in Ponyville though,” Applejack said softly as she looked out over the trees. “My dream? It’s having a home I can share with family, and friends I can have fun with; a place that’s all my own. One that I built with my own hooves and hard work,” she said as she looked at Twilight Sparkle with eyes as bright and green as the leaves of the two apple trees. “And I got it, Twilight. I got it.”

Twilight Sparkle sat beside her, looking out at the rows of trees. Each one planted by hoof, watered and tended and cared for. Every building made by some pony that needed it and wanted it. Twilight smiled as she munched softly on a tender Tulip as well. “Still, it is an amazing farm.”

Applejack laughed softly, “I reckon so. And it ain’t done yet. I figger we can turn at least three more acres into apples up north a ways. Gotta clear the rocks and break ground and... heh... a whole lot of work. But it’s worthwhile, Twilight,” Applejack said calmly as she tugged the brim of the

leather hat down. “And like doing anything worthwhile, it takes blood, sweat and tears.”

Rarity's Rodeo

As the leaves of Apple Acres farm started to change from green to yellow the morning was filled not with the thud of hooves upon apple trees but the frantic thudding of hooves tearing up the field behind the barn. Applejack raced down the field, darting between the flags as close as she dared, zig-zagging back and forth between them. The candy-cane striped poles passed so closely she felt the brush on the tips of her ears. Big Macintosh waited at the finish line, stop watch ticking the seconds. Four poles left. Three. Two...

"Applejack!" Twilight Sparkle called out. The misstep was only an inch or two, but it sent the thin flexible pole smacking right across Applejack's face! Applejack staggered and collapsed in a heap right at the finish line. Big Macintosh sighed and clicked the stopwatch in his mouth as Twilight Sparkle and Rarity ran up. "Applejack, are you okay?"

"What *are* you doing?" Rarity asked.

"Oh, this?" Applejack chuckled as she stood and shook off the dust, sending the white unicorn several steps away. "This is pole bending; one of the events at the Equestrian Wide Open Rodeo! It's being held in Ponyville this year." She pointed with her hoof at the run. "The idea is to run lickety split between 'em without knocking over a single pole!"

"Sounds positively... sweaty," Rarity said distastefully before she turned to dig into her saddle bag and pulled out Applejack's signature hat. "Well here you are. I sewed the brim back in place."

"Thank ya kindly, Rarity. When I tore my hat apple-buckin', it was like I tore my best friend," she said as she took the hat in her mouth and tossed it back in place atop her head.

"Rodeo. Rodeo," Twilight Sparkle murmured and scratched her chin as something niggled at her memory. Then her eyes popped wide, "Oh my gosh... Applejack! You can't enter the rodeo!"

Applejack blinked and then frowned at her friend. "What you talking about, Twilight Sparkle? Why can't I?"

"Because Rarity has to enter," Twilight Sparkle answered matter-of-factly, pointing her hoof at the white Unicorn.

Both of them stared at Twilight a moment and then Applejack burst out laughing. She slapped her hoof against the ground. Rarity gave a slightly incensed laugh as well. "Whatever are you talking about, Twilight Sparkle? Why on earth would I ever want to enter a rodeo?" Rarity demanded as if asked to sew stripes and spots on the same garment.

"Because THAT was what Applejack dared you to do back at my slumber party, remember?" Twilight Sparkle said as she gestured to Applejack. "Applejack dared you to enter the rodeo when it came to town, and you dared her not to enter the rodeo."

Applejack stopped laughing at just stared at Twilight Sparkle. "Well stripe my mane and call me a zebra, that's right! How in tarnation do you remember all these things?"

"It's a gift," Twilight Sparkle said proudly, hoof over her heart.

Rarity shook her head, "Twilight Sparkle, you can't possibly mean that. It was just a silly argument. Besides, I just know Applejack would be heartbroken if she couldn't enter." She glanced at the orange workhorse, "Right, Applejack?" There was no answer; just an almost calculating gaze. Rarity felt her mane start to curl, "Applejack?"

Applejack just looked at Rarity and her lips curled slowly as her gaze flattened smugly and then said dismissively, "Nah, I'm good." Applejack said with a casual shrug.

"Habazawha?" Rarity stammered.

"The rodeo's a blast and all, but I've competed in it... shoot. How many times, Big Macintosh?"

"Mmm... four now." The large red pony supplied.

Applejack tapped her hoof. "There ya go, four times! Won last year and the year before that! And you've never had the privilege of competing even once." The orange pony's expression was of pure satisfaction. "Rarity's rodeo... the thought of it just gives me goose bumps." Happy goose bumps from the grin on Applejack's face.

"I... I simply can't! I have orders and clients that cannot wait. And there must be deadlines for signing up! Who will feed Opal?" Rarity stammered, trying for any excuse.

"Well, Fluttershy and I can watch your shop," Twilight Sparkle said with a smile. "I'm sure we can keep you from falling too behind on your orders and take care of your cat."

"And you can just take my place in the rodeo," Applejack said with a wave of her hoof. She tossed off her hat, caught the brim in her mouth, and threw it so it settled atop Rarity's purple curls.

Rarity hung her head with a sigh and gave a petulant, "Yee-haw..." But as she looked away there was no question she was up to her horn in trouble.

* * *

In the pre-dawn twilight, Rarity lay snug in her bed, mane rolled tight and tucked under her nightcap with a lace trimmed blindfold blocking out the morning light. "Rise and shine, cowpony!" shouted Applejack, and Rarity screamed as she jumped clear out of the covers and landed in a heap in the middle of the rumpled sheets. Her bed-rumpled mane exploded in wild curls around her shoulders as she looked at Applejack with one twitching eye. "Time to begin your training," Applejack said with a grin.

"Training... what training?" Rarity said before cognition set in. "You're waking me up this early to train for a rodeo I have no chance of winning?"

"Well I wouldn't say no chance. Slim, maybe, but better that than ending dead last," Applejack said as she rubbed her chin.

"I am going to end up dead last. I am planning on ending dead last!" Rarity said sourly as she grabbed her sheets and burrowed back into them. "Now let me rest! I need at least two more hours' beauty sleep or my eyes will be all puffy."

Applejack just stared at her, "You mean you aren't even going to try?"

"That's the general idea." Rarity said, waving her hoof dismissively out of the sheets at her friend. "The dare was for me to enter, not to try and win." There was no answer from Applejack and Rarity frowned then turned to peek over her shoulder to look at Applejack's confused and shocked expression. "What?"

"Landsakes, girl, you know what! How can you enter any competition and not even try? You had no compunctions against enterin the Young Flyer's Contest with them magicked up wings of yours."

"That was different," Rarity said as she sat up in her bed, scowling at Applejack, "That was a contest of speed or grace. I can win at grace, but running around getting all sweaty just to place last anyway? Where is the sense in that?"

Applejack just looked at her with an odd expression. Disappointment. "No sense at all, I reckon," she said as she rose. "Just that I'd rather see a filly place dead last giving it her all than one who wastes every pony's time not even bothering." Applejack turned and walked from the room without another word.

Rarity grabbed her pillow and turned on her tummy, pulling it over her head as she clenched her eyes shut. It was just a stupid rodeo. A competition she could never win no matter how hard she tried. So why should Applejack's disappointment matter to her? The orange mare was simply doing this to humiliate Rarity; why indulge her?

She's an equal. That was it. That was the galling truth of it. Despite her crude and filthy manner, Applejack was the closest pony to being Rarity's equal. Applejack cared about business and her farm with the same diligence that Rarity did her shop. She was mature and down to earth, similar to Rarity's own sophisticated tastes. She'd even been to Manehattan. Had any of her other friends travelled so far? If the rest of

her friends were disappointed with Rarity's behavior it was simple to dismiss them as immature. If she refused to compete or simply gave up it would be a blow to her pride; something else she had in common with the orange pony. She buried her face in the pillow and gave a scream of frustration, kicking her hooves. Then she went limp.

Rarity didn't like failure one way or the other, but losing her own self respect? That was something she could never do.

* * *

Applejack reached the farm as the Princess brought the sun up over the horizon. Her shadow stretched along the ground ahead of her to where the practice equipment was set up. Then she saw a second shadow besides hers. She glanced back and stared at Rarity with her hair pulled back and tucked behind a sweat band. Hoof warmers were wrapped around all four of her legs. But besides all that was the look in her eye. Sure. Angry. Maybe even a little bit cocky. "All right Applejack, let's do this!"

* * *

Applejack nipped around the three barrels in the barrel race and came to a stop at the line. Big Macintosh clicked off the time. Rarity crouched and raced towards the first barrel and around it. She trotted to the second, dripping sweat. Slowly she walked around the third. She almost made it to the finish line before collapsing in a heap.

Applejack crossed out a day on her apple monthly calendar. Six days to go.

Rainbow Dash joined Rarity at the starting line of the sprint. The cyan Pegasus carefully showed Rarity the starting position. Rarity mirrored her form precisely. Twilight Sparkle waved the flag. In a cloud of dust Rainbow Dash zipped across the finish before she glanced back. Rarity stood, choking and gagging on the cloud of dust still on the starting line. Rainbow Dash gave a sheepish grin and shrug in response to Twilight Sparkle's stern glare.

Another day crossed off the calendar. Five days to go.

Applejack rode the bucking bull with glee, the strap wrapped around her hoof as she waved her free hoof in the air, cheering. When kicked off, she picked herself up and looked back at Rarity clinging to a brown and tan cow placidly chewing her cud. Slowly Rarity started to slide, landing in a heap beneath the cow. Applejack covered her face with a hoof.

Another X. Four days to go.

Spike laid on Rarity's flank in a daze, staring up at her in adoration as Rarity looked at Applejack. The orange mare mimicked vigorous kicking techniques and then grinned at her in support. Rarity arched a skeptical brow, looked back at Spike, and hunched her hips once or twice. The enthralled baby dragon didn't budge. Rarity looked at Applejack in consternation. As her head was turned, Pinkie Pie snuck over and placed a hairy fake spider on Rarity's flank. Rarity glanced back and her eyes shot wide as she kicked the hideous thing off as hard as she could. Spike went sailing over the fence of the corral and into a bale of hay.

Applejack grinned widely. Rarity's eyes were round with wonder as another day was marked off. Three to go.

Twilight Sparkle calmly diagrammed several different roping techniques, writing out the complex formulas needed to preserve the angular acceleration. Rarity just stared at her blankly, looked at the rope, and used her magic to animate it as a spinning lasso. With a toss the rope pulled Twilight Sparkle off her hooves and looped itself around several times. With a smile Rarity left the corral and an slightly disgruntled Twilight Sparkle in the middle of the pen.

Chuckling at the sight of Twilight hopping out with her hooves tied together, Applejack crossed the day off. Two days to go.

Rarity returned to the barrel race. Big Macintosh kept time. Twilight waved the flag and Rarity raced as hard as she could while her friends kept anxious watch. She ran across the finish line, sweaty and dusty as the stop watch was clicked. Her friends checked the time and let out a cheer. Fluttershy fanned the exhausted Rarity as she sank with a tired smile at the end.

Off went the day. Tomorrow: the rodeo.

* * *

"I sure am proud of all the work you've done this week, Rarity," Applejack said as they trotted out of the practice corral alongside the Unicorn. "I know you didn't want to do any of this, but you stepped up and made a dandy effort."

Rarity gave a shaky laugh as she walked out of the paddock and towards the farm house, "Well it's like you said, Applejack. Better to try and fail than to not try at all," Rarity replied as they climbed on to the porch where Granny Smith had put out two chilled apple juices. Beads of condensation gleamed on the cool glass as they overlooked the farm. "Ugh, I feel positively grimy. I could do for a three hour soak at the spa."

Applejack just chuckled and shook her head, "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?" The white unicorn blinked in surprise.

"Well, why do ya spend so much time on that fancy shmancy stuff? It just don't make much sense to me that you hate ta get dirty, but you'll let em slap a layer of imported muck and yer happier than a pig in a sty." Applejack asked honestly and openly, then blinked and quickly added, "Ah, not that yer a pig or anything..."

Rarity suppressed a giggle behind her hoof and shook her head, "No offense taken." She looked at the glass between her hooves. "I suppose it depends on the reason for the mud."

"Huh? Mud is mud, ain't it?" Applejack said as she scratched the side of her head with a hoof. "You telling me that fancy mud's... like... magiced up or something?"

"No. It depends on the context. When I get a mud facial, it's not the mud that different. It's the circumstances. I'm warm. Comfortable. Safe. I'm being pampered because I chose to go through it. And it positively does wonders for one's pores." She looked out towards Ponyville, her azure eyes going distant and sad, "But mud in other contexts...being stuck

outside on a rainy night... well... let's just say that it brings up unpleasant memories."

Applejack looked a bit intrigued. "You mean ta tell me ya had a traumatic experience with a mud puddle or something?" And Rarity's smile slipped, and for one moment Applejack saw an expression of solemnity that she'd never seen before. It was a look like when Applejack was looking at Apple Acres and feeling like it was the best place in the world. The look on Rarity's face right now was the same Applejack wore when she thought about everything that it'd cost her to get. Applejack suddenly stammered, "I... I'm sorry."

"It's alright, Applejack," Rarity said as she rose to her feet and moved towards the porch steps before she froze and then said softly, "Do you really think I'll do well in the rodeo tomorrow?"

Applejack opened her mouth and closed it. She coughed softly, "Well... um... I'd say... ah..." Then she glanced up and saw Rarity's deep blue eye looking over her shoulder. The orange pony stammered as she flustered and then admitted, "I'm... pretty sure yer gonna get creamed. But you'll do yer best, and there won't be one pony that'll think less of you." Applejack swallowed, sure that she was about to get snapped at.

"Thank you, Applejack," Rarity said softly as she turned to smile at the baffled farm pony. "For not telling me what you think I want to hear, even when I want to hear it. That truly is a precious gift." Applejack just went stiff as a board, pupils contracting as Rarity stretched forward and gave Applejack's cheek a little nuzzle before she drew back with an enigmatic smile. "Well, see you tomorrow, Applejack." And with that she turned once more and walked away from the farm house. Applejack didn't trust herself to blink.

Then she noticed Apple Bloom, Big Macintosh, and Granny Smith standing at the corner staring with barely repressed giggles, utter stupefaction, and addled confusion respectively. Her orange freckled cheeks turned bright red as she stammered, "I was... she... and... we were talkin about mud! Mud, ya hear!"

Apple Bloom finally couldn't contain it as she fell back, clutching her sides as she laughed in glee, "Oh mah, wait till I talk ta Sweetie Belle!" Big Macintosh's jaw looked like it was fit to come undone as it hung open.

"I... you... oooohhh.... I'm gonna go buck some apples!" She said in a huff as she yanked her cowboy hat down atop her blond mane and stalked off towards the apple orchard, fuming in embarrassment.

* * *

The Equestrian Wide Open Rodeo spread out along the grounds used months earlier for Ponyville's Iron Pony competition. Ponies from all over Equestria came to celebrate earth pony traditions that were still alive for the nostalgic, the macho, and the competitive. Around the dusty arena sprouted a massive collection of booths, game stalls, vendors, and even a large Ferris wheel. The rodeo wasn't just for pony kind. Cows ambled in their herds discussing milking techniques, the finer points of cud, and their appreciation for the helpful ponies that looked out for them. Chickens moved in more sporadic patterns as they clucked over corn futures and egg laying. Even pigs looked forward to the available garbage when the day was through.

"Mmmmm boy! Nothing quite smells like a rodeo!" Applejack said with relish and she inhaled the pong of sweat, food, rides, animals, and their associated by products. Her friends looked a little less enthusiastic, but with everything going on even Fluttershy seemed excited in her own way. There was just one catch, "Now where is Rarity?" She looked around with a little frown.

"Maybe she's not gonna show?" Rainbow Dash suggested obnoxiously as she looked at some of the game booths. "I mean, she probably got a pony pedicure and just can't risk a hoof."

"Nah, she's gonna be here. No pony puts herself through that much trouble fer no... n... n..." Applejack's voice trailed off as the crowd parted before her and her friends for a white unicorn mare. Rarity had arrived, her mane and tail tied in a tight braid to keep her gorgeous curls out of the dirt. A demure light tan vest complemented her embroidered boots. A blue bandanna tied around her neck matched the blue diamond set in the neat little cowboy hat perched atop her head.

“Howdy, ya’ll,” Rarity said in a twang so matching Applejack’s that the orange pony froze in shock, utterly paralyzed. “I have great news. Since we’re going to be out and about, I thought perhaps some fitting attire was in order.” And reaching into her saddlebags, she threw out outfits that seemed to magically cover each and every one of them.

Fluttershy found herself in a southern belle cotton dress and bonnet, lace parasol shading her from the sun. Twilight looked quite sharp in her purple vest, bolo tie with garnet clasp, and cowboy hat decorated with the same pattern as her cutie mark in gemstones, but not as sharp as Rainbow Dash in striking black leather vest, red bandanna, black duster, and lasso. Pinkie Pie giggled as she once more wore a lacy black outfit of a saloon dancer. Spike looked quite exotic as he found himself in mariachi garb. Her friends looked at each other, admiring their outfits.

“How do you do that?” Twilight Sparkle asked in amazement, trying to work out how Rarity could dress them all just by flinging some outfits.

Rarity raised her head proudly, “It’s a gift.”

“Well hurry up, ya’ll! It’s a party! Rodeo style! Yeehaw!” Pinkie Pie cheered as she bounced past Rarity. Twilight Sparkle immediately began to comment on the historical accuracies to Fluttershy as the yellow Pegasus looked over the animals wandering exhibits. Rainbow Dash walked past the still stunned Applejack and smacked her upside the head as the cyan Pegasus hurried to catch up with the others.

“I... um... you look... wow...” Applejack sputtered.

“Surprised?” Rarity asked with an arch little smile.

“A bit, yeah,” Applejack then looked down at herself and saw the clothes she wore weren’t fancy or neat. The vest had been well worn, and the white and red apple print bandana had clearly seen some use. The boots fit snug as a bug and Applejack started. “Wait... Rarity, these are my own duds!”

"I figured you probably wouldn't want to look all... well... prettified. Big Macintosh got them for me," Rarity said with a nervous smile. "Was I mistaken?"

Applejack opened her mouth and closed it again. "Well... maybe I wouldn't mind so much, seeing as how you're the one competing in the events," Applejack admitted.

Rarity gave a little squeal and at once whipped out an extra outfit, throwing it over Applejack. As quick as magic, Applejack wore the green vest edged in fringe, matching boots, and a bolo tie with an apple slide on the front. Her hat remained the same, but a green ribbon had tied itself around the base. Applejack looked at herself and gave a chuckle of approval, "Well looky there. Ya outdid yerself, Rarity."

The white unicorn flushed scarlet at the unexpected compliment. "Not too much?"

"Not too much at t'all," Applejack said with a smile.

"Well *that* certainly sums you up, Applejack!" a voice jeered from nearby. The tan earth pony with mustard yellow mane wore a sneer almost as big as the duster she wore. Three bucks followed in her wake. "Do you actually plan on competing in that?" On her flank was a cutie mark of a rattlesnake's rattle.

"Diamondback. I though you got yerself banned last year fer cheatin!" Applejack sneered.

"Made an appeal," she said with a scowl, "Didn't mean ta kick ya in the head durin the sprint."

"Yeah, I believe that like I believe apples just fall from the sky." The animosity in their glares simmered in the sun as Applejack continued, "I ain't competing this year, but I just know some pony'll put ya in yer place," Though from her glare it was clear that now Applejack certainly wanted to be said pony.

"Hrmp. Doubt that," Diamond back said as her eyes turned to Rarity. "And yer the idjit that took her place?" She looked Rarity slowly up

and down with a look of, disappointment? “To think, yer what they’re callin cow ponies now... yer gonna getcher mane all dirtied up.”

Rarity looked at Diamondback with utter disdain, “Comes with the events.”

“Oh, I say it does. Long with bruises, cuts, contusions, broken bones, and busted necks,” Diamond back said with a malicious grin. “Can’t wait ta see ya in the arena. Come on, boys,” She said with a jerk of her head, scowling as the four of them stalked off.

Rarity deflated a little. “Well, that was quite the disagreeable mare. I assume you two have a history?”

Applejack looked like she’d just eaten her own baked bads. “Yeah. Beat her two years ago. Then last year she tried ta cheat ta win. Got caught. Looks like this time she’ll probably take the rodeo trophy,” Applejack said grimly before she sighed and shrugged. “Ah well. Still makes her a lousy good fer nothing snake. Wanna go catch up with Twilight and the others?”

“Actually, I’d like that very much,” the white unicorn said with a playful smile, “Let’s go partner,” Rarity said as she drawled out her words.

“Ugh, I do not talk like that!” Applejack retorted, receiving a giggle in return.

The seven friends prowled the rodeo grounds drawing every eye, and not just for their stunning appearance. Pinkie Pie discovered the wonders of sugary kettle corn, the huge puffs of blue and pink cotton candy, salty pretzels, and all manner of other pastries. They passed by the Apple Acres booth, where for the second time Big Macintosh’s jaw hit the floor at the sight of Applejack and Rarity strolling along together. Then the pink pony found the chili eat off and was set for the day.

Twilight Sparkle was recounting Equestria history points to any pony in ear shot that’d listen, which proved more than one might expect. There were old hoss’ around that happily jawed about ‘good old days’ where ponies would escort cows and other live stock from one community to the

other. A few even took fun with trying to see how closely Twilight could assess the accuracy of their cowboy accoutrement.

With Twilight Sparkle thus occupied, Fluttershy was free to break away and settle herself in with the other animals. She shared their stories of farm life from the cows point of view, and was quite sympathetic with the cows complaint of farmers milking them with cold hooves. She laughed softly and recounted her own experiences with Elizabeak and the cockatrice.

Not having any interest in food, history, or animals; Rainbow Dash found herself in a funk. That is until a games booth barker questioned her ability to knock over a stack of milk bottles with a bean bag. Not one to pass up a challenge, she gave it a shot and watched the bean bag bounce off the bottles. The barker laughed outrageously as the Pegasus narrowed her eyes. She glared at bottles as if they'd killed her father; prepare to die!

Spike was a little put out that all his friends had scattered... again... but that lasted as long as it took for a filly to gush, "Oh my stars and garters, he's so cute!" Suddenly the miniature mariachi found him surrounded by a gaggle of girls going gaga over his geniality. Spike tried his best to fit the role... even if he didn't speak a word of Spanish. They didn't seem to care as they gushed over the baby dragon.

Thus Rarity and Applejack found themselves together on the bleachers overlooking the arena. The buck events were first, and Applejack was amazed at the focus the white unicorn put in on the events. "Yer really serious about doing well in this, aren't ya?" Applejack observed.

"If I'm going to do something then I want to do it right," Rarity said firmly as she watched how the bucks handled roping; particularly since she wouldn't be allowed to use magic as she had on one Unicorn.

"Well, I got to say I appreciate it. I mean, I never reckoned you'd ever be interested in cowponies," Applejack chuckled softly, "I was half afraid you'd show up in some ridiculous ten gallon hat with a big old belt buckle with yer name on it."

Rarity looked at her archly, "I almost did," she confessed with a little blush, "and if I'd gone through with my plan a week ago I'd probably look

ridiculous now. All fringe and rhinestones. But this is important to you, Applejack, so I want to look good. I want to do well.” She looked back down into the arena, “I have to do it right. No mistakes.”

Applejack cocked her head in confusion. “Why are ya like that, Rarity? I mean, as long as you do it and do yer best, why try and be perfect all the time?” Applejack asked as she tilted her hat back to look at the solemn white Unicorn. “Uh... was it something I said?”

Rarity looked at her with a soft smile. “No. Nothing you said.” She gave a soft sigh as she looked back down into the arena. “Have you ever failed at something important? Something that really mattered to you?”

“Well... I was pretty sore at myself during that Applebuckin disaster. Not just for not doin it myself but for all the trouble I caused.”

Rarity nodded, “Yes, I saw how busy you were. I had to ask some pony else to help me move some stock rather than impose on you.” Rarity closed her eyes. “I’m not a perfectionist, Applejack. I’m a coward. I’m afraid of failure.”

“You? Well you might have that weird mud phobia but...” Applejack started to joke till she caught the serious look in Rarity’s azure eyes. Her smile faded. “What’s wrong with failing? Every pony messes up some times.”

“Yes, every pony does. But when I was young, I made a mistake. It was stupid and selfish, even if I did it out of love, and it cost me something...” She closed her eyes and took a breath before she finished softly, “something unique.” She opened her eyes, looking into Applejack’s as she continued, “Since then I’ve always tried to play things safe. The only time I ever took a risk was with my fashion, and even those were relatively safe. No one dies from a hideous petticoat or clashing colors.” She looked down at her boots. “If it hadn’t been for Twilight arriving, I doubt that I’d have taken risks even with fashion. I’d be a mediocre mender of other ponies’ designs.”

Applejack looked over where a bucking bull sent a colt flying and winced. “Well, then why are you doing this?” If it was pride, Applejack could understand it.

“Because you think I can,” Rarity replied, looking at her with those deep azure eyes. “Don’t you?”

Applejack swallowed, wanting to look anywhere else. Finally she sighed and smiled, “I think that this is your first rodeo. Somehow it feels like it’s mine too. It’s gonna be tough, but I know if there’s any pony that can do something she really wants to do... well, that pony is you.”

“And I know you’re not just telling me what I want to hear,” Rarity replied with that small sure smile. “Thank you, Applejack.”

Applejack fidgeted a little as she took off her hat, twisting it a little in her hooves as she glanced over at Rarity once... twice... and then leaned over to give her cheek a little nuzzle. Rarity’s eyes went wide in surprise, but as Applejack drew back nervously the orange workhorse saw only amused glee in the Unicorn’s eyes.

Suddenly the announcer blared out, “Attention fillies and gentlecolts! The mare’s events will begin in half an hour. Half an hour till the mare events begin!”

Applejack rose and looked over the fair grounds. “Well, best go round up the gang. You want to come with?”

“No. No I think I’ll wait here,” Rarity said lightly, feeling as if she was about to show her spring wares to the entire fashion society of Canterlot, with the Princess in attendance... both Princesses!

“Be back lickity-split,” Applejack said as she ran off to collect their friends.

Rarity watched her go, and then there was a low hissing chuckle from behind her. The tan mare, Diamondback, from earlier approached with her three posse in tow. Diamondback narrowed her eyes as her lips curled, “Well well. Applejack *likes* you. I didn’t really think her barn door swung that way.”

Rarity stood and backed up. "What... of course it doesn't. You don't know what you're talking about!" She stammered, her eyes darting from one to the next.

Diamondback just sneered as her brothers laughed darkly. "Oh yeah. That nuzzle? Priceless." Diamondback slowly started to walk past Rarity, but kept her voice low. "You know, I was really looking forward to stomping Applejack. But you know what... I think stomping you while she's stuck in the stands watching is gonna be much much better."

Rarity grit her teeth as she watched the four walking towards the arena, "What is your excuse for this... this... unseemly and rude behavior? Just what is your problem?"

Diamondback stopped in her tracks. "Unseemly?" She glanced back over her shoulder up at Rarity on the stands as her eyes narrowed and her breath hissed out through her teeth, "Do you have a clue what this is?" She yelled as she swept her hoof across the arena and the rodeo. Her yellow eyes seemed to flash as she slowly advanced back up towards the lone white unicorn. "You ever even think about what all this means?"

"Well... I..." Rarity stammered, backing up till her rump hit the rail at the top of the stands. Oh to have wings right now. "It's a... competition." She could understand competition, but she didn't understand the rage and frustration in Diamondback's face.

"Competition? A hoofrace is a competition! Hoofwrestlin's a competition! This is a legacy!" Diamond said as she pointed out west. "My daddy was a wrangler. And so was his daddy and his daddy before him! Competition." She spat at Rarity's feet. "Ponies like you made it a competition so that ponies like Applejack could play at being real ponies. This was supposed to be a way of life! Living free and surviving and winning however you could. But today..." She finally let out her breath, and she seemed to sag in resignation. "Today it's a competition where I got to fight against a lily butt like yerself. My daddy would be sick ta see it."

"Diamondback... I..." but what could she say? She'd simply joined out of a dare with her friends and a need to prove herself. She'd never imagined it could mean so much to some pony.

“Don’t. I don’t want your pity. I just want to win so that maybe, just a little, this rodeo can be how it was: rough, tough, and free.” She gave Rarity one last look before she walked back down towards her waiting three friends, muttering just loud enough for Rarity to hear, “She’s got a pony pedi... end of the world...”

Rarity watched her go, feeling more confused than ever. Why had everything started going so... strange? She couldn’t simply give up... wouldn’t really even after what Diamondback had said. Diamond had her own reasons to win, and Rarity could respect that. She’d felt it in her own throat. Still... looking at Diamondback’s friends... it was a touch unnerving. When her friends arrived, Rarity put her best smile on. It was time for Rarity’s first rodeo.

* * *

Pole bending was the first event: zig zagging between ten poles six feet apart and then back to where she’d started. It sounded simple enough, but even grazing the poles was enough to knock them over. “I have to hit it just right,” the white pony said as she put herself in Rainbow Dash’s posture, waiting for the unicorn judge to shoot sparks from her horn. She became aware of a niggling touch to her hoof, but before she could look the spark fired with a terrific bang.

Rarity launched herself forward, and landed firmly on her face. A length of rope had conspicuously unwound under her and caught her hoof. The timer was still running! Shoving as hard as she could she rose to her hooves and was darting back and forth between the poles. Her eyes narrowed as she imagined herself as a needle crossing back and forth between two panels of cloth. She went around the last pole so closely it tickled her flank and she raced back, back and forth, grazing each pole before she crossed the finish line panting and gasping for air. The arena burst into cheers as rarity’s time was posted at just two seconds under Diamondback. The tan pony scowled as her surly brother coiled his rope.

The calf haul was next, and calves lined up on one side of the arena while the mares lined up on the other. Each mare had to snag a specific calf and carry it safely back across the line. Rarity kept her eyes open for more tripping ropes. She missed another brother leaning in and whispering into the ear of the calf with Rarity’s number. The calf went ramrod straight.

Bang! Rarity raced for her calf, getting slammed hard by Diamondback as she tore towards her own. The calf with Rarity's number shrieked, "Ah! She's gonna eat me!" And turned, running from Rarity!

Rarity gasped, her lungs burning before she said in her most imperious tone, "I am not going to eat you! Where would you get such an idea? Now get back here this instant." The calf stopped as she realized she was in big trouble, and skulked back. Rarity ducked her head and lifted her like she was a bolt of burlap. Heavy, but manageable. "Hold tight, dear." And she ran back, cutting around other mares and calves. She arrived only a few seconds after Diamondback, who threw her calf off her shoulders and fixed Rarity with a venomous glare.

Cutting came next, where Rarity had to separate three marked cows from a herd that stood together, chewing their cud placidly. Diamondback charged in, butting and shoving till the three scampered for safety away from the others. "Get movin, steaks!" the tan pony snarled. While her methods were brutal, they were effective. She kicked a faceful of arena dirt in Rarity's face as she left the arena.

Rarity looked at the disgruntled bovines, now in even less of a mood to move after Diamondback. The spark fired and Rarity walked to the herd, smiled politely, and bobbed in a curtsy. The cows blinked in amazement at the display, "Good evening ladies. You're looking ravishing today. I simply must commend your coats. Such a delightful wash of browns and tans. Truly, underappreciated colors," Rarity said, the complements flowing from her like water and drawing the attention of the cattle. "I was wondering if perhaps you three lovely ladies would be willing to come with me over there for just a moment. I've been thinking of developing some bovine fashions and I'd adore your input."

Given that few ponies ever asked cows their opinions on anything, the three marked cattle followed Rarity to the side. Diamondback's mouth gaped in astonishment as Rarity beat her time by five whole seconds! Of course she still chatted with the three ladies for a bit. After all, one never knew when an opportunity to expand into bovine fashion would present itself.

The barrel race proved much harder for the unicorn. The distance was almost three times that of pole bending, and as she rounded the third barrel she was nearly tripped by a carefully hidden broomstick handle. As graceful as a ballroom dance she recovered, actually pirouetting to keep her hooves underneath her. Her time was still lower, and there were many ponies who closed the gap by a handful of seconds. Rarity panted, catching her breath as she spotted one of the three scruffy ponies tucking a sawed off broom head under their coats.

At the halftime, Diamond back was in the lead; the pony with the lowest total time would win the rodeo. Rarity, however, was only eight seconds behind her; practically snapping at her heels. "I have to say, Rarity, I'm really impressed! I never expected you could be so tough. You're in the top five!" Twilight Sparkle cheered.

"I'd be doing better if Diamondback stopped cheating!" Rarity said sourly as she looked over at the sinister quartet.

"She's cheatin again?" Applejacks nostrils flared as she gave the tan mare a green glare of death.

"Well... *she* might not be, but I'm pretty sure *those* other three are. I could have broken my leg when I tripped on the barrel race. It was hard enough just running all that way," Rarity said, enjoying the breeze Fluttershy provided.

"Well if they're cheating... there's no reason we can't make them uncheat, right?" Twilight Sparkle asked as she looked at her friends with a smile.

At the next event, the sprint, one of Diamondback's posse magically threaded another rope through the hooves of the contenders with his lasso. Suddenly a bright orange hoof stomped down on the glowing length of rope. The bile colored Unicorn colt looked up at Applejack and Fluttershy. Fluttershy's stare locked with his and his eyes went wide. Slowly the scruffy pony gave a brown smile and withdrew the rope. Rarity ran the length of the track, but her time was horrible. There was simply no getting around the fact that she wasn't a sprinter.

Calves lined up for the calf roping, each of the young betting who could last longer. The second of Diamondback's posse poked his head from a gap in the bleachers. "Psst! Hey, kid. Want some candy?" He opened his coat wide and presented them with vision of confectionery delight.

"I'd love some!" Pinkie Pie said right in his ear. He turned, gaping at the pink pony in bafflement. Pinkie Pie then let loose a kettle corn, cotton candy, chili blend belch that made his eyes water. Gagging, he raced away leaving a trail of sweets in the dirt.

"Awww..." the calves moaned in disappointment. Rarity had much more luck roping than running, even if she couldn't use her magic. A gentle smile lured them close before she tossed the rope neatly around the calf's neck. Really, what was a lasso to Rarity but an exceptionally large string?

Getting ready for the bronco buck, Snips and snails stood dressed head to toe as garish clowns. The blue unicorn looked at his mustard coated friend and asked in confusion, "So... uh... how'd we get roped into this again?"

"Duuuh, cause it's a rodeo?" Snails replied with his content, moronic smile.

"Oh yeah," Snips nodded, and then seemed to realize this was not a good idea as they sat on Diamondback. She looked over her shoulder at them and gave a venomous hiss, eyes narrowed to slits as she glared at the two unicorns on her back. "Um... hello... please don't eat me," Snips plead.

One buck in one second sent both of them into the arena wall. "Dah... at least she didn't eat us, eh?" Snails groaned.

As they pulled themselves free, the third pony of the posse pulled out a jar of glue and began to drizzle it over the two clueless colts when a magical light illuminated the glue and froze it in place. He gaped in shock before Twilight redirected the sticky sludge to coat the scraggly Pegasus. Then Rainbow Dash upended a pillow and coated him in feathers. "That is one ugly turkey," Dash cackled as he ran off.

When the pair climbed on to Rarity she gave them both a smile and fluttered her eyes. "Why hello there, boys." In the stands, Spike bit down on his tail to suppress his growl.

"Yowzers... you're awfully pretty, lady," Snips marveled.

"You're too kind," Rarity said with a smile. "Would you like an autograph?" She floated a picture out from under her cowboy hat and scribbled a signature, handing it to them.

"Woah..." they marveled, and missed the sound of the spark firing.

"Heeee-yah!" Rarity shouted as she bucked hard and sent the two flying just as fast as Diamondback had.

The pair groaned and Snails muttered, "At least we got a picture, eh?" Then a purple hand stretched down from the arena bleachers and snatched the glossy out of Snail's hoof.

The final event, bull riding, was one of the most heavily anticipated. For eight seconds Rarity would have to hold on to a bull paid to send her flying. Each second on would shave a second from her time. Each kick and buck would take off a half second. Bull riding could make or break a rider at the Equestrian Wide Open.

Diamondback gripped the strap with glee as she sat in the saddle. She rode with skill and glee, lasting her full eight seconds and getting three and a half more shaved off for difficulty. Rarity looked at the score with undisguised nervousness. "You don't have to," Applejack said softly as she put a hoof on Rarity's shoulder.

"What?"

"You don't have ta ride. It's dangerous. Ya put in a fine showing and there's no pony here that'll think less of ya for sitting it out," Applejack said softly.

"One pony will," Rarity said as she lowered her eyes.

“Who, Diamondback?” Applejack gave a snort. “I reckon that snake in filly clothes thinks less o every pony on general principle.”

“No, not her. Me.” Rarity said softly as she bit her lip, then looked around. “I never imagined I could ever do anything like this, Applejack. And I wouldn’t have tried. I wouldn’t have dared, if you hadn’t been here to help me.” She swallowed as she looked at the massive bull in the pen who gave a sour grunt. “I want to finish this, Applejack. I don’t want another part of my life that I look back on asking myself ‘what if?’.”

Applejack swallowed, “I don’t want you hurt, Rarity.”

“Some hurts are worse than others, Applejack. So tell me what I need to...”

Applejack kissed her. It wasn’t a suave and sophisticated kiss or a smooth kiss or a practiced kiss. It was an honest kiss, and that made it all the more precious. Their friends looked on in shock and amazement. When Applejack finally pulled away, Rarity seemed almost in a daze from it.

Applejack held her in her hooves, talking low and soft, “I’ll tell you what. If the bull goes left, you lean left. If he goes right, you lean right. If his head goes down, you lean back. If his head comes up, sit up. And you hold on. You hold on for eight seconds and you don’t let go for nothin’! You hear me, Rarity Pony?”

Rarity coughed and swallowed, blushing furiously. “I... yes... I hear you.”

“Then go out there and show em what you can do. And then... then I reckon we got a lot of stuff to talk about.” Applejack said, looking at her friends with her own furious blush. “Wut?”

“Nothing!” Twilight said with her own blush.

“Oh...” Fluttershy tapped her hooves together awkwardly.

Pinkie Pie covered her mouth as she giggled in glee.

“Applejack... and *Rarity*?” Rainbow Dash asked in utter bafflement, wondering what had happened to the universe that would ever make that remotely possible. Then her eyes met Applejack’s stern glare and the cyan Pegasus immediately forced a smile. “Never mind! I’m good.”

Rarity climbed up into the chute and slipped into the saddle on the bull’s back. Any second now the spark would fire. Then she glanced down at the far side of the bull. Diamondback leaned against the rails, scowling up at her with her narrow yellow eyes. “I just wanted to say... good luck.”

“What?” Rarity blinked in shock.

“Wanted to wish ya luck, all right? My posse... seemed to want to give me an edge...” Diamondback looked like she wanted to bite the three shabby (and one feathery) colts. “Wasn’t ever my intention ta win by being sneaky. Wouldn’t be right. So... good luck. Don’t break your neck.”

The spark fired.

The door of the chute opened. The clock started. Time slowed as the world became just her and the bull. For one horrifying instant, Rarity realized this was all a mistake. Everything. She should have stayed in her shop, designing dressing where the only risk she faced was an unhappy customer. The bull’s head dropped slowly and she felt the forces that would fling her from its back.

Then she heard Applejack’s voice calmly in her ear. “Head goes down, lean back.” It was as if Applejack were sitting right behind her, holding her to the saddle and guiding her backwards like a partner in an elegant dance. ‘Badum ba-da-dum-dum...ba-dum-de-dum-dum...’ the music began to play. The bull kicked and then rose, and she leaned forward as it sprang. The timer took forever to get to six.

Turning left. Leaning left. Kicking. Lean back. Spin right, lean right. Each move, she could feel Applejack right behind her, telling her exactly what she needed to do. Right now, she could do anything. *I can win at grace.*

Then the strap snapped. Rarity felt herself moving further and further away as the saddle pulled free from the back of the bull. She tried to flap

wings she hadn't had in months as she arced over the arena floor. She could see her friends watching, Rainbow Dash trying to lift off and reach her. Applejack... *I'm sorry Applejack. I couldn't hold on.*

The impact sent a jarring wave of pain through her body as she hit and rolled across the arena floor. Oh that hurts. Rarity thought as something in her left foreleg throbbed in pain. She curled up, clutching the limb, tears of pain in her eyes. Yet... despite the pain and tears, she found herself laughing too. In all her life, she could never have dreamed she would ever break her leg riding a bull.

Shortly after that she was levitated by Twilight Sparkle and carried to the nurse's tent where magic soothed the pain and wrapped it up in a cast. Apparently in the meantime there'd been a near riot when the strap was found undone. The bull pointed a hoof right at Diamondback about being right where the cinch was buckled just before the spark had fired. There'd been a bit of a row as Rainbow Dash, Twilight, and Pinkie Pie had to restrain Applejack from murdering Diamondback.

An hour later, Rarity had a moment to look at herself in the mirror. Her fancy outfit was now filthy and stained with sweat and dirt. Her mane was slowly revolting against the tight braid and the cast would be absolutely hideous for weeks to come. Yet, in spite of all of it, she smiled. She glanced at her flank and the three winking gemstones. Diamonds were beautiful, but they were also tough. They seemed to suit her even more now.

"Hey," Applejack said as she stepped into the nurse's tent.

"Oh, ah... hello...", Rarity said with an embarrassed smile.

"Looks like the cinch on yer saddle wasn't checked properly after Diamondback's ride. I reckon she probably cut it or some such."

"No. She wouldn't cheat on this." No more than Rarity would try to win a fashion contest by tearing another designer's work. "It was just bad luck, I suppose," and yet she wasn't feeling disappointed or angry at her loss. How strange that she'd tried so hard and had it come up for naught.

Slowly Applejack walked to her and leaned against her, helping her take the weight off her limb. "Ready?"

Time to go. Ah well, not the way I wanted to end it, Rarity thought, but even this sour note wouldn't ruin everything she'd learned and discovered. Nodding, she let Applejack support her as they limped out of the nurse's tent.

There was nothing left to be done but to go to the awards. Sitting with her friends in the stands, resting her head on the side of Applejack's neck, she watched as they gave out ribbons for the various events. She was a little taken aback when Pinkie Pie's name was called, and the pink pony whooped as she bounced down to receive first prize for the chili eat off. Thankfully, they managed to get her off the stage before Pinkie Pie could start singing 'Chili, the musical'.

The awards slowly built up to the final set. Rarity listened in anticipation, despite the fact that she knew she hadn't won. Third place went to one of Applejack's Appleloosan cousins. Second place to a broad grinned colt who tripped and fell flat on his face ascending the stairs. Finally it came to the last. "Winner of the Equestrian 100th Wide Open Rodeo is... Diamondback!"

There were more mutters than claps as the tan pony climbed up the steps with her jaw clenched and a vinegar glare in her eye. "Thanks," was all she said to the crowd, gripping it in her teeth before she stalked back off the stage.

"Now *that* was awkward," Spike muttered as he crossed his arms.

"And finally! The prize that goes to the best new competitor each year for the pony that has shown the most courage and drive to win!" The silence built as hundreds of ponies held their breath in anticipation; Rarity included. "Rarity!" Called the announcer. The stands erupted in whoops and cheers, perhaps the loudest being Fluttershy, hopping like a mad pony as she congratulated her friend.

"I won?" Rarity blinked in shock.

“You had a doubt?” Applejack replied with a laugh. “Come on, let’s get you up there, girl. Never knew you to turn down a prize.” With Applejack supporting her on one side and Twilight Sparkle on the other, she made her way on stage and took the admittedly smaller silver trophy in her magic. Her azure eyes slowly read each word.

‘Equestrian 100th Wide Open Rodeo: Best Amateur Competitor. Rarity.’ “This is your rodeo, Rarity,” Applejack said over the din. Rarity laughed and cried as her magic lifted the trophy with the unicorn cow pony high above her head and the crowd went ballistic.

* * *

“Congratulations,” Rarity said as she found Diamondback sitting on the edge of the Rodeo staring at the silver and wood trophy. The tan filly looked up in shock at seeing Rarity standing there in her cast and immediately scowled.

“Come for a laugh?” Diamondback spit again as she clenched her jaw.

Rarity ignored the display; gross but not nearly so shocking when repeated. “No, I came to offer you congratulations.” Instead she limped over to sit next to her holding her small silver trophy between her hooves. “Yours is bigger than mine...”

“You won,” Diamondback muttered. “You won the rodeo. This might say first place, but it don’t matter none. Every pony here loved the prissy pretty pony.”

“I’m sorry, Diamondback.” She said as she dropped her voice. “I know this meant a lot to you.”

“Ugh! Don’t you pity me!” She said as she stood and pointed at her with a scowl. “Rodeo ain’t what it was. Awards. Trophies.” She knocked hers away with a kick. “I wanted folks ta see being a wrangler is tough! That being a cow pony is a challenge! Not some competition.” She took a few steps away as she lowered her head, “I wanted ta feel like how my daddy musta felt... and grand daddy before him. But this ain’t it. Ain’t it at all.”

What could Rarity say? She felt sorry for the cantankerous filly, but there was nothing she could do to change the world so she could be happy. "What will you do now?"

"Go back out west I reckon. Look for jobs... must be some ranch somewhere that still needs some pony to ride herd and get the critters where they need to be." She replied as she looked back at Rarity. "What about yerself?"

"Oh, back to dressmaking and designing, I'm sure. There's never a lack for that," and yet their eyes met with a strange understanding. Rarity had, for a few seconds, tasted the freedom and thrill that Diamondback craved like water in the desert. She loved her shop and home and friends and designed, but now knew the thrill of something... more.

"Not that," Diamondback said crossly. "I meant you and that orange mule you were nuzzling! What about that?"

"Oh! I... don't know?" Rarity admitted, tapping her chipped hooves together. "It's all terribly awkward right now."

"Heh..." Diamondback smirked and shook her head. "She don't deserve ya." Yellow eyes looked at the trophy as she sighed, "Ain't sure what to do with this hunk o junk. Be a pain to haul it on the range."

"Perhaps I can hold on to it for you. Just in case you ever want it again." Rarity offered and then quickly added at Diamondback's sour scowl, "It'll be a reminder of what a real rodeo rider is really like."

That made her chuckle as she stood. "Take care o yerself, Rarity." And with that Diamondback turned and rode off into the sunset.

* * *

It was starting to get dark and Applejack and Rarity sat together on the Ferris wheel, looking out at all the cowponies below as they rose slowly above it all. Diamondback and Rarity's trophies sat beside them; she felt like if she let it out of her sight it'd evaporate. Below them they could see

Rainbow Dash with a wagon and a veritable army of stuffed toys won from the games booth. Twilight Sparkle and Fluttershy talked together. Pinkie Pie munched down on chili peppers as by-standards gave the pink filly a wide berth. Nothing good could come from that much beans.

"It about stopped my heart when I saw you thrown," Applejack said quietly as Rarity rest her head on Applejack's shoulder.

"Mine too," Rarity murmured softly. Then she looked up at her with her soft deep blue eyes. "You kept me on that bull you know. It was like we were together, dancing. You were showing me all the moves I needed to stay on."

"I ain't much of a dancer," Applejack confessed.

"I think you're better than you realize," Rarity countered, and then took a deep breath as she asked the dreaded question. "So, what now?"

"Well we go home and you get ta rest up..." Applejack began till she saw the serious look in Rarity's eyes and her feigned joviality faded. "I dunno... I always figgered there'd be some pony special in my life someday. Didn't see much point in getting fussed over it. Never imagined in a thousand years it'd be a filly... and never could imagine it would be one Rarity."

"Because I'm such a prissy fuss-bucket?" Rarity asked with an arch little smile.

"That... and because you're better than me," Applejack admitted softly. Rarity's eyes opened wide in shock. Applejack sighed, looking away. "I know yer something special Rarity. Yer stronger than any pony knows. Yer graceful and sophisticated. You can do anything, Rarity. Anything if you really want to. But I know what I am, and it ain't even close to you. That's the simple truth."

"Applejack."

"I know what I am, Rarity. I'm a farm pony. All I am. All I want to be. But you can go see the whole world if you want. One day you'll make it big and you'll move to Canterlot or Manehattan. Probably making clothes for

the Princesses. And I'll still be a farm pony when you're a world famous designer."

"Applejack..."

"So... best to nip this in the bud now, cause it'll never work out." Applejack said with a sniff. Then Rarity reached over, covering Applejack's mouth with her hoof.

"Applejack... being a world famous designer in a big city would be excellent... but there is something I can think of being that would be even better." Rarity said as she sat up and lowered her hoof.

Applejack just blinked in stupefaction, "Wut?"

"Having a friend who truly cares for me; who is honest and pure, and who will help me open my life to new, exciting and wondrous things."

Things just like this, Rarity thought as she rest her head against Applejack's shoulder and looked out at a life she could only imagine. And as the Ferris wheel lifted the pair high into the night sky, Rarity could only marvel at the rises and falls her life had taken. *This is my life*, she thought to herself as her eyes closed and she melted against Applejack.

Rarity's Rodeo.

Second Impression

The sun shown down on the green fields and forests of Equestria, and in a copse a brilliant red and gold bird trilled from the top of a small shrub. Tiny purple pompoms waved with each jerk of its head as it sung a sparkling string of bird song. Unbeknownst to the small avian, a periscope rose above a hedge and slowly rotated to fixate on the musical little bird.

"And that is the Royal Crested Gold Collar Robin," Fluttershy whispered to her friends Twilight Sparkle and Spike. The purple unicorn steadied the periscope as Spike peered through the glass to draw the bird's picture in a book. "Normally they're active only in the morning or evening, and nest only in low lying shrubs near rivers." The lemon colored pegasus explained softly as Spike did his best to jot down the notes next to the picture.

"Wow, Fluttershy. With your animal expertise I think this will be the most exact census of Ponyville's avians in years." Twilight Sparkle said with a smile to her friend, who blushed at the praise.

"Oh, I'm not that much help. I mean even I don't know exactly how many Royal Crested Gold Collar Robins are in Equestria."

Spike finished scribbling a question mark next to the "population" entry and the purple dragon glanced up at the shy pegasus, "Why don't you just go out there and ask him, Fluttershy?"

"Oh no, I could never do that." Fluttershy said in concern. "He's trying to find a lady friend and wouldn't appreciate it if we interrupted him."

"Yeah, I guess I can respect that," Spike said after a moment's reflection.

Carefully Twilight Sparkle lowered the periscope and levitated the book. She flipped through dozens and dozens of pages. She glanced over at her friend and then coughed, "Gosh, when Princess Celestia asked for this, I didn't think there'd be this much information. I'm sure she's going to have questions."

"Oh, well, um... if she really wants to know she can just ask me. If she really wants to," Fluttershy added quickly.

Twilight closed the book and rubbed her chin with her hoof. "Actually, Fluttershy, that's an excellent idea!" The yellow pegasus' eyes

went wide in confusion. "Why don't you come with me to Canterlot when I present the census to the Princess?"

"C- C- C- Canterlot?" Fluttershy trembled. 'YOU WILL LOVE ME!' echoed in her mind as she swallowed hard. "I... I can't. Who would look after my animals? And Angel Bunny is having a new tooth come in."

"Eh, I can do it Fluttershy. It'll be good to hang out with Angel anyway. Do some bro stuff," Spike said with a casual grin, gesturing smoothly with his hands. He then looked away and rubbed his stomach as he added absently, "I really need to do that."

"Please Fluttershy? It won't be a long trip," Twilight Sparkle asked with that serious little smile. Fluttershy lowered her eyes and gave a little gulp.

* * *

The view of Equestria from the Princess' chariot was spectacular. Pulled by two taciturn but friendly pegasus mares, Twilight spent most of the trip pointing out the magnificent sights beneath them. Fluttershy curled up as tightly as possible and did all she could not to be sick. She didn't even open her eyes until the chariot finally touched down on the yard before the castle. When she stepped off, her heart still remained in her throat.

"Thank you very much," Twilight thanked properly, the census tucked in her saddle bags. The two pegasus gave the pair parting smiles before they took off to fly around behind the castle. "Wow, sure looks different, doesn't it? No coaches or fancy dresses, huh?"

Fluttershy swallowed and didn't answer. *She's simply being Fluttershy*, Twilight thought and walked in the front entrance reminiscing about that disastrous night. She missed the gaze the pegasus directed towards the large garden adjacent to the castle.

So much fear rolled through Fluttershy that she tuned out Twilight completely until she ran into her friend's rump and sat back hard. "Um, Fluttershy. We're here." Twilight Sparkle said flatly, gesturing with her hoof towards the door. It opened into the Princess' study. Hundreds of books and scrolls lined the walls while tables and couches carved in the images of curving vines and flowers held strange and unusual tones.

"Twilight Sparkle. It's so nice to see my student again without all of Canterlot wanting to shake your hoof!" The Princess said warmly as her red, blue and green mane blew in a magical breeze. "Honestly, I nodded my head so many times that night; it felt like my head about to fall off." Then the princess' royal purple eyes turned towards Fluttershy. They

danced with amusement, but she said gently, "And hello Fluttershy. I wish I'd known sooner that you were coming as well. Philomina would have enjoyed spending time with you, but I'm afraid she's gone off adventuring again. Still, I'm sure there are many other animals here for you to make friends with."

Fluttershy's lips moved soundlessly in agreement, but in reality something unpleasant reared up inside her. Fear, but something else. Something worse. Her friends' time at the Grand Galloping Gala had been a fiasco, but for Fluttershy it was something more. She thought of the animals, and instead of a warm glow spreading through her heart she felt something sour inside that made her frown. It hurt, and she didn't like the feeling one bit.

The Princess spent all of a quarter hour talking about the census. In that time, not one question arose that wasn't immediately answered by the census. The Princess asked more about the overall health and morale of the birds around Ponyville, and left the specifics for later reading. Fluttershy simply lay down on a couch with a rapidly cooling cup of tea next to her and a slowly crumbling cookie between her hooves. In no time the conversation got off on magic, and Fluttershy lowered her head even more. Now she couldn't even understand the conversation between the pair. But what could she do? She didn't know anypony here. She didn't even have animal friends she could visit.

I miss Angel Bunny. And Henrietta. And the squirrel twins. And everyone.

"Fluttershy?" Twilight Sparkle asked in concern.

"Huh?" Fluttershy looked up, realizing her hooves were empty and a large heap of cookie crumbs lay before her. "Oh, I'm so very sorry."

The Princess shook her head gently, "No, dearest Fluttershy, I'm sorry. You came all this way to give us your expertise, but I'm afraid we took the conversation off on completely unrelated tangents." The Princess said, nodding her head in apology. "It's just rare that I have time to speak directly with Twilight about her studies."

"I know!" Twilight Sparkle said brightly. "Why don't you go to the garden and visit with the animals?" Fluttershy's throat seized up so only a squeak escaped.

"That's a wonderful idea! I just know they'd love to meet with you," the Princess enthusiastically agreed.

Fluttershy couldn't make a noise. The horrible sensation welled up in her throat to the point that she thought she was going to be sick. She'd rather be sick than feel like this. But she couldn't tell the pair what

she really felt, so she slipped off the couch without a word and walked from the room like she was going to her own execution. The pair watched her leave in concern. "Don't worry Princess, she's still a little off from the flight. It's a bit much for Fluttershy."

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The Princess' Gardens were a marvel of Equestria. Fluttershy had dreamt of it since she'd arrived on the ground; a place with animals from all over the world gathered together in one place. Animals she would never ever see around Ponyville she could finally meet. Babbaboons and wallerros; ligers and banda bears and snowdeer; Hummingbirds that hummed and buzzards that buzzed. Everything about the garden should have inspired bliss in Fluttershy.

Instead she laid besides the moat looking at the trees and distant birds in misery. Suddenly she heard a bright a cheery whistle and despite herself she sat up. Her ears twitched. "Is that the Royal Crested Gold Collared Robin?" She looked towards the trees and shrubs and swallowed softly, "Maybe... maybe he came all the way from Ponyville so I wouldn't be lonely?" It seemed impossible, but it allowed her the smallest bit of hope. Slowly she walked towards the open gate of the garden.

Inside, she saw it. Just like her dreams. The animals, in their flocks and herds, scampered through the trees and nibbled at the grass. Slowly her head lifted and a smile crept across her face. There, seeming to beacon her forward to join its animal friends, was Mr. Robin singing his heart out.

"Oh, Mr. Robin, I'm so happy-" she started as she took a step forward.

The animals scattered so fast only clouds of dust and stirring leaves marked their passage. The beautiful birdsong disappeared, and only silence remained. "-so see you..." Fluttershy stood there, feeling her heart pounding as she clenched her eyes shut. That horrible, horrible feeling finally crawled up her throat like spiders scuttling from a hole in the ground. "I... I hate you..." she whispered.

There was a long, low, surprised whistle from behind her. She looked over her shoulder, tears running down her cheek as she grit her teeth. The old brown pony in his battered green hat and frayed blue saddle blanket stood with his fore hooves folded lazily on the handle of a shovel. He pushed the brim back, his blue eyes looking down at Fluttershy coolly. "Those are some mighty powerful words coming from so kind a mouth."

Fluttershy felt everything inside her all twisted up. "I don't care. I hate them. They're all mean stuck up animals who won't be my friends."

The old pony gave another soft whisper of surprise. "Well, I don't reckon there's many folk that'd be friends with someone who hates em. Just saying." He said as he walked a little ways away and started to whistle brightly as he turned over some earth in a flowerbed.

Fluttershy clenched her eyes shut. There had to be a way. All animals loved her. They *should* love her. There was no reason for them not to love her. It chewed her up inside as she looked around. "There's a trick, isn't there?" She asked the old pony, her soft voice hissing in suspicion.

"Huh?" he asked in surprise as he brushed his long stringy mane out of his face.

"Some trick to it. To make them nice?" Fluttershy asked sharply, softly, looking up at him for some clue. "What is it? Treats? Animals love treats. Or maybe something shiny? Cute little clothes? Neat little nests?!" She asked again and again, drawing closer and closer, gritting her teeth. "Is there a password?" Suddenly she gripped him by his shoulders and shook him vigorously, "Tell me the stinking password!"

"Woaaaaah there, young miss!" he said as he pushed her away, jiggling from the vigorousness of her interrogation. "Where'd you get it in your head that you had to trick someone into being your friend?"

Fluttershy stepped back, looking at him in shock and horror. What had she been thinking? "I... I..." She stammered as she looked at him looking down in concern and bafflement. "I... I should go..."

The old pony just watched her and scratched his rump before shrugging and going back to his gardening. Fluttershy started towards the exit, now more upset than ever. Everything in her had gone wrong... what had she just done? Maybe Rainbow Dash might act like that, but Fluttershy felt her heart race at what she'd just done to the kindly old pony that was just taking care of the animal's home. "What's wrong with me?"

She suddenly looked back behind her at the old pony. What did he know? "All I need is a chance. Just one. They'll love me. They have to!" She whispered furiously, glancing at the back of the whistling old mare.

An old apple box, a rope, and a carrot; that's what she needed! This time she suspended the box over the carrot, holding the rope between her teeth. Now she'd see when they took the bait! Then she'd have her chance! She crouched in the bushes, waiting. Waiting... there! A beautiful

white baby bunny crawled towards her bait. Yes, just a little closer. A little closer.

Suddenly the old pony sang out in his rusty old voice, "...by yon ponnie banks and by yon ponnie bays, the light breaks bright by Loch Looooooooomond!" Every note hit was the wrong one, making Fluttershy jerk and sending the crate flying up and over the tree branch. It landed with a crash atop her head. The old pony walked past, the little bunny hopping along with her carrot.

Fluttershy's glare could have burned a hole in the wood.

The shovel had been the clue! She'd dug as deep and fast as she could, smearing her coat in mud. Twigs and leaves made a precarious floor that would give way even under the most delicate bunny! She placed a second carrot and wiggled into the bushes. A moment later she stared out of the bushes as the baby bunny reappeared. It hopped towards the leaves. One... another... another. Yes! She'd come to its rescue and care for it and make it all better. Then it hopped around and walked right into the middle of her platform.

"What?" Fluttershy gasped as it munched on the carrot. Her wings beat once as she pounced with a cry, "Love me!" The bunny ran past. The thin plank slipped in amid the leaves gave way under Fluttershy. The leaves fluttered down atop her as the old pony strolled by with a dozen pieces of lumber carefully balanced on his back, whistling brightly.

Fluttershy had been too simple. She needed to get with the times! She could build a trap bigger... faster.... More reliable! She wasn't exactly sure where she found the old boiler, steam engine, zip cord, drift net, and other materials but no pony would deny that they were effective! The net was carefully strung out around the clearing, attached to the cord, and hooked to the engine. All that remained was to bait the trap. Fluttershy trotted to the center of the clearing to place her last carrot.

She turned to see the bunny standing atop the cord release lever. Her eyes went round. "Oh no... no no no!" She shook her head furiously. The bunny shook its head as well. Fluttershy smiled and nodded. The bunny smiled, and nodded, tapping the release lever with its foot. Fluttershy suddenly sweated hard as she shook her head again. The bunny nodded and kicked the lever hard.

With a great hiss and whoosh the line jerked tight and the net swooshed across the clearing, scooping Fluttershy up. She screamed as it whipped her through the air once and then released. She flung through a clothesline set up with adorable baby clothes, coming out the other side wearing a pink onesie and baby slippers, smacked into a baby bottle, and

crashed into a crib that immediately started to rock and play a lullabye. She lay there seething, as the old pony strolled by, looked at the boiler and exclaimed, "Oh, so there's Old Steamy! I wondered where I'd put it."

"That is it!" Fluttershy screamed as she kicked the cradle to splinters, ripped the baby clothes to tatters, and spiked the baby bottle. Filthy, with a swelling bump atop her head, and dressed like a mad horse she glared at the old pony with loathing. "You won't stop me!"

The old pony stopped and looked back at her with a sigh, "Young miss, maybe you should think about what you're doing, yourself?"

"I just need a chance for them to love me!" Fluttershy protested in shock.

"Oh? You trap all your friends till they love you?" The old brown pony asked curiously as he dismantled her trap.

"What?" Fluttershy blinked in confusion, pulling her pink mane in frustration. "No... I mean I shouldn't have to!" Why was he making it all so confusing?

"Well I should think you shouldn't. It's an odd friend that only likes you after getting tied up." He continued pushing the equipment back where she'd dug it out.

"I... wha... ohhh.... OOOOOHHHHH!!!" Fluttershy bounced in place, stomping the remains of the cradle into pieces. "That is it! That is it! That is it that is it that is it!" She yelled over and over again as she pointed her hooves at the trees where the birds peeked out at her, "I am sick of you! And you!" She pointed at the Babbaboons and the Walleroos lurking in the woods. "And you and you and you!" Fluttershy stomped towards the exit. She was DONE with Canterlot. She was going to drag Twilight Sparkle out here by her horn if she had to!

Suddenly the white bunny hopped out right in front of Fluttershy. She could have been Angel Bunny's little sister and the adorable creature looked up with her large wide eyes and twitchy little pink nose. Fluttershy's heart stopped as she gazed down into her eyes. The rage she felt disappeared for a fragile moment as she gazed down at her. So cute and sweet and innocent. Slowly Fluttershy lowered herself to the grass and extended a hoof towards her. "H...hello, little one. P...please don't go..." she said softly, pleading, her hoof shaking slightly. "Please... please please please..."

The baby rabbit gave a nervous step back. "No... no no no..." Fluttershy's pupils contracted as her throat tightened. Suddenly the baby rabbit turned and lept away for the protection of some hedges. "No! Get back here!" She shouted, diving at the white rabbit as fast as Rainbow

Dash going for the finish line. She swooped and caught up the baby rabbit in her hooves, hugging it tightly and trying her best to pet it and nuzzle it. "That's it! That's it... we're going to be friends... yes we are. We are going to be friends!"

"Now that's enough right there," the old pony said as he walked up, looking down at Fluttershy sternly. "You let Precious go this instant."

"No!" Fluttershy hissed. "She's mine! My own! My Precious!" She coughed deep in her throat as she shook, petting the baby bunny as hard as she could. Animals liked to be petted! They did!

The old brown pony looked at her and then calmly sat before her, "Fluttershy, right?" Fluttershy blinked, suddenly wary. He couldn't take the bunny from her, could he? "Look, Fluttershy." Suddenly Fluttershy didn't want to. She was afraid to look down. She started to cry as he stared calmly into her eyes. Her gaze dropped slowly, bit by bit, till she stared at the tiny bunny in her hooves. The white bunny quivered in terror, no... in pain! Fluttershy started to shake and gave a little hiccup. "Let her go, Fluttershy."

Slowly her grip relaxed bit by bit. The white rabbit the jumped free and flung herself into the old pony's arms. "Shhh. There there, Precious. It's all right." He gave the tiny bunny a pat, "I think she'll recover."

Fluttershy stared at the old pony through her tears as she quaked. That should be *her*! It should be *her* arms that the bunny came to for comfort. Just like Angel did when there was thunder and lightning. "I hate you," she whispered. Why did she hurt so much like this? She'd have rather died than feel like this!

The old pony gave a great sigh as he looked at Fluttershy in pity. "Oh? Why's that?" He said conversationally, as if discussing her favorite color.

"Because... because that should be me," she said as she pointed and accusatory hoof at him, "They should love me!" She hissed, as if all the terrible feelings she held were bubbling out. She never could have talked like this to her friends. "It's my talent. It's the only thing that I'm good at that matters!" She looked at Precious in his hooves and bowed her head to sob brokenly, "So why won't they love me?" Everything hurt. Everything.

"Such a young filly," he murmured with a soft smile, brushing her tangled pink mane out of her blue eyes. "So animals just take one look at you and just fall in love? That's some talent. You should have a horn."

Fluttershy hiccupped and rubbed her tears. "What?"

"Your talent. Makes animals fall in love?" He said with that kindly smile, "You just have to sing and all the birds fly out and join you?"

"Yes. They always like me," she said slowly, but now feeling unsure. Like there was a trick or something.

"Always? Right away?"

Fluttershy opened her mouth and closed it again. "Well... no. Not right away..."

"Oh?" The old brown pony asked as he took off his blanket and dabbed away her tears. He passed it to her and she sniffed, then blew her nose hard. He didn't flinch as he took it back.

"Well when they met me they were all scared of me," Fluttershy said softly, remembering that moment she'd fallen to earth. So many scared animals, and she was just as scared of them as they were of her. Then Rainbow Dash's sonic rainboom has scattered them all into hiding. "But... I was nice to them. I waited for them to come out and to me."

"Really?" The old brown pony sounded impressed. "So no tricks? Traps? Body tackles?"

Fluttershy just frowned at her hooves. Her voice softened in confusion, "Well, no. I was just nice. And patient." As she looked at the old brown pony, she felt something else. Those horrible feelings were... well not gone, but so much less. For the first time she felt her heart relax and the tension relax.

"Huh. Sounds like it took a long time," the old pony remarked as he pulled off his battered green hat and fished out two apples, passing one to Fluttershy. "So why'd you come here thinking that all the animals would just love you like that?" He clapped his hooves together.

"I..." Fluttershy faltered, looking at all the scared animals watching the exchange. "I don't know..." she said softly as she held the apple.

The old brown pony took a bite out of his apple, "Some folks who are good at something forget that it takes time. Look at this garden. Been working it forty years. It's my talent." He swallowed and smiled at her. "If I went to Ponyville thinking I could make a garden just like it overnight, well I'd be a gosh darned mule of a fool, wouldn't I? Special talent or not."

Fluttershy smiled her first real smile since they'd left Ponyville. "When they ran, I felt like... like suddenly I wasn't special any more. Like I was... nothing. It made me so... so..." she swallowed and whispered, "...angry."

“Well I’m pretty sure your purple unicorn friend wouldn’t be much better about it if she stopped being able to do magic or that rainbow filly couldn’t fly faster than sense.” That made Fluttershy giggle. “The point is to remember that it’s more than talent. It’s time. Some friendships you can try for years and never get someone to care in return. So long as you don’t stop being friendly, it ain’t hopeless. Thinking you can *make* someone like you... or heck, *love* ya? That’s hopeless.”

Fluttershy nodded and looked at Precious without feeling that horrible pain. For the first time since she’d arrived at Canterlot that night at the Gala she was glad to be in Celestia’s garden. “I’m sorry Precious. I’m so sorry.” She slid her apple to the tiny bunny. The white bunny sniffed at it warily, looked around for some traps, and then hopped away behind the old pony.

Fluttershy sighed softly. It hurt, but not like before. She’d made a horrible impression, not once but twice. It would take a long time to make up for it. “And I’m sorry for you as well, sir.”

“Shoot, girl. Call me Gramps.”

* * *

Twilight Sparkle and Fluttershy walked out the castle gate and towards the nearby garden. “Well it’s been great meeting with you, Princess, but I got to ask why’d you ask me to bring Fluttershy along? And being so sneaky about it? I mean, you didn’t even ask her any questions at all.” The purple unicorn trotted alongside her mentor, looking up at her curiously. “I’m not sure Fluttershy likes Canterlot very much.”

“Well Twilight, sometimes it doesn’t hurt to get everything out in the open,” the Princess replied cryptically, as usual. Sometimes it was simply impossible to get a clear answer out of the princess.

Dusk was falling, and in the garden came the sound of laughter. Twilight Sparkle hadn’t ever heard Fluttershy laugh so openly in such a long time. Within the garden fireflies were coming out. Fluttershy lay in the grass besides another pony watching two large simians trying to get a banana out of a tube. They both had a grip on it, and wrestled back and forth. But what shocked Twilight Sparkle was that animals weren’t flocking around Fluttershy like they normally did. In fact, aside from a small white bunny between an old brown pony’s front legs, all the animals appeared to give them a wide berth.

“Fluttershy?” Twilight Sparkle asked in bafflement. She hadn’t expected to see Fluttershy so... happy to not be surrounded by adorable creatures.

“Oh. Hello Twilight. Hello Princess Celestia,” she said softly as she rose. The old pony chewed on a long strand of wheat as he watched on. “This is Gramps. This is Precious.” Fluttershy said, gesturing to each. “I don’t know the other animal’s names, yet. That will take some time.”

“Mhmmm,” Gramps said with his own smile and nod.

“Well, you look much better than earlier, Fluttershy,” the Princess remarked with a smile.

“I am,” Fluttershy admitted softly, looking up at the princess as her smile faded. “I was so angry to be here, but I forgot that building up great friendships take time. And that it’s wrong to hate something because it doesn’t do what you think it should.” Twilight Sparkle’s jaw dropped. Fluttershy? Angry? *Hating*?! The pegasus smiled sheepishly, “Instead of taking things for granted and being impatient, it’s better to let things happen in their own time.”

“My. It sounds like you had quite a visit,” The Princess remarked, impressed. “But I’m afraid my Chariot is waiting to take you back to Ponyville.”

“Aw, too bad.” Fluttershy said as she turned to Gramps. “I’ll try and visit again real soon.”

“You do that, young miss.” Gramps said as they shared a hug. Fluttershy started towards the exit, when suddenly the little white rabbit ran up to the yellow pegasus. Both paused as the little animal fidgeted, then gave her foreleg a hug before running off. Twilight Sparkle just stared in bafflement as her friend smiled but at the same time looked like she was about to cry.

“Um... so... um... does all this go in my letter?” Twilight Sparkle asked in concern, because there was way too much happening for her to start to explain. She’d need footnotes.

“I don’t think that’ll be necessary. Count this one as a freebie.”

“Whew,” she gave her mentor a parting nuzzle and raced off to join Fluttershy at the chariot. The whole flight home Fluttershy positively gushed about the different animals she’d seen in the garden to the point that Twilight Sparkle couldn’t get a word in edgewise. Still, she didn’t really mind much this time.

“Well I’m glad you had a good time, Fluttershy. I have to admit, I wasn’t sure you’d enjoy yourself,” Twilight Sparkle said as they left the Chariot, bid the two pegasus farewell, and strolled into Fluttershy’s cottage.

It looked as if a tornado had struck it. Angel Bunny lay sprawled out with a distended tummy, an empty tub of carrot ice cream next to him. Big Macintosh was stuck in the corner with a lampshade on

his head and a rather confused and embarrassed expression while Owlowski lay in the remains of a pizza. Spike stood on the back of her couch, wearing a hat with two apple juice bottles attached to straws and a pair of white underpants singing, "We are the dragons; yes, WEEEEEE are the dragons. Nooooo time for loooooosers, cause weeee are the draaaaagooooooooons..."

"Spike!" Twilight Sparkle shouted and everyone in the room froze.

"Oh... uh... Hi, Twilight!" he gave a sheepish wave then blushed and grabbed the tawny owl, hiding his nethers behind it. "I can explain this!"

"I'd just love an explanation," Big Macintosh muttered from the corner.

Twilight Sparkle was just about to burst when Fluttershy stepped past her. "Fluttershy?"

"It's just a little mess," she said softly as she scooped up Angel Bunny and gave him a little hug. "Right now, it's just good to be back with my friends."

* * *

Almost fully night, the princess lay with Gramps in the garden watching the fireflies glowing while Luna carefully guided a lovely moon and brilliant stars into the sky. Really, it was so much more work than just moving a single sun. The Princess had taken years appreciating that fact. All around the pair doze the animal guests inhabiting the garden. Philomina nestled in the Princess' hair, cooing softly.

"All right, you old hayseed," the Princess said with a smile. "What was all this about? Why'd you ask that I conduct a survey of the birds of Ponyville? And suggest that I ask Twilight to bring Fluttershy along? And send away Philomena for the day?"

He pushed back his battered green cap as he chewed on the strand of wheat, "Why Princess Celestia. Don't think that, just because you move the sun and the earth and are bajillions of years old, you're the only pony allowed to work in strange and mysterious ways."

"Hrm," she said with her own curious expression before gazing at the garden around them. "The garden looks lovelier than I've ever seen it." And despite the dark and how he tried to play it off cool, she knew that Gramps blushed at the praise.

“Still needs some work. Some more planters. Maybe some bird houses for the robins,” he said softly, looking at the space with his bright blue eyes as if he were once again a colt thinking that everything should be beautiful just because of his talent. “It just takes time, Princess. Time, patience, and a loving heart.”

Simply Rarity

“Surprise!” Pinkie Pie yelled as she popped up in front of Rarity waving her hooves as more and more ponies filed into Sugarcube Corner. A massive banner that said ‘Happy Birthday Twilight Sparkle!!!!’ draped across the far wall proclaimed the event, and the balloons were a dead giveaway.

“It’s only a surprise to any pony lacking a calendar, literacy, or sight, Pinkie Pie,” Rarity said properly as she levitated the bright purple wrapped bundle to the stack of packages.

“Oh, yeah.” Pinkie Pie rubbed her bright, curly mane before she grinned, “But surprises are funner!” Her grin was positively infectious, and Rarity simply sighed and gave in, smiling at her friend.

“Yes, Pinkie Pie. Surprises are more fun.” Rarity didn’t have the heart to correct or argue as she walked calmly over to the mare of honor and her friends, leaving Pinkie Pie to ambush another pony with her glee. “Twilight Sparkle. So sorry I’m late but I had to finish a dozen silk ball gowns for delivery this afternoon. Such a chore.”

“Oh it’s all right. I know how hard you work to meet your deadlines,” Twilight Sparkle said brightly.

“Business has certainly been brisk. I don’t know when I’ve ever enjoyed such a streak,” Rarity said as she brushed her hoof off on her sleeve and casually examined her pony pedicure.

Applejack glanced over and gave an annoyed little grunt, “With all that business you must be rolling in the bits. You’re the only dress maker in Ponyville and you’re making all those fancy duds for rich folk in Canterlot and Manehattan.”

“I... a lady does not discuss her finances, Applejack,” Rarity said crossly.

“Yeah, but every pony knows how I sweat for my bits. So tell me, Rarity, how much do you bring in? A hundred bits? Two hundred? Three?” Applejack watched the Unicorn flush and stammer, taking a little bit of satisfaction in Rarity’s discombobulation. “Shoot, you might be the richest pony in Ponyville.”

Rarity flushed brightly. “I... I am not, Applejack!” But there were other ponies looking her way and the white Unicorn gave a harumph, nose in the air. “This discussion is over.”

Applejack almost got another dig in when Fluttershy entered and Pinkie Pie started to bounce around the bakery. “Everyone’s here! Everyone’s here! Presents, pastries, and party games, oh my!” The pink pony grabbed Twilight Sparkle and pushed her towards the stack of presents on the table. “Open them. Open open open! Mine first!”

Twilight Sparkle smiled as she tore open one package after the other. A joke book of 101 magical pranks from Pinkie Pie. A box of candy apples from Applejack. A picture of Rainbow Dash signed, ‘From Equestria’s best and most awesome flyer.’ “What?!” the pegasus retorted, hooves spread at the flat look given by her friends. A golden quill pot from the Princess. A small vial of perfume from Fluttershy. Something that might have been a Twilight Sparkle doll from the Cutie Mark Crusaders with the note ‘No toymaker cutie marks.’ Spike gave her one of his baby fangs which had fallen out a few weeks ago. And from Rarity...

“A book!” Twilight Sparkle said in glee, then frowned as she opened it up and flipped through the pages. “An empty book?”

“It’s a journal,” Rarity said brightly, flushing as she looked at her friend’s incredulous looks. “You can write your thoughts down and.... Stuff.”

“Pretty chintzy gift,” Rainbow Dash said softly. She got a few glares, but more than a few ponies looking curiously at Rarity. “Well it is! I mean she could have gotten Twilight Sparkle a real gift instead of a two bit journal.”

“Yeah. What? A dozen dresses doesn’t clear enough to get her something nice?” Applejack taunted. But her smiled disappeared as she

saw Rarity wasn't angry by her nettling. She was crying! Applejack's grin quickly melted into concern, "Hey now... I..."

Rarity looked around at all the ponies staring at her before she pressed her lips together. "I'm very sorry," she said formally to Twilight Sparkle. "I'll try to get you something... better." And with that she turned on hoof and walked slowly for the exit. Head high, neck firm, ignore tears and no pony would dare bring them up. Just like Madam taught her. "If you'll excuse me, dresses don't make themselves."

"Rarity? Rarity!" Twilight Sparkle called after her but she disappeared.

"What is wrong with her?" Rainbow Dash asked as she fluttered in place. "Jeeze, I got to wonder how she's supposed to be the generous one?"

"That's not fair, Dash. Rarity donated a lot of her time and energy to us," Fluttershy said softly as she approached, "Remember all that work she did for our dresses for the Gala?"

"Yeah, which we paid her for. Remember us constantly telling her to keep it inside our budget?" Rainbow Dash asked with frown.

"Actually I remember a lot of singing about that," Pinkie Pie said.

"I'm just saying that even if she's generous with her style and talent and stuff, that pony is seriously cheap when it comes to the cash. You can't tell me that she doesn't make enough with a dress of sapphires to pay all her bills and splurge on her friends occasionally!"

"At least she earns her money," Applejack countered. "When are you gonna pay your apple tab, Rainbow Dash?"

"Eh, when I make it big with the Wonderbolts, natch." Rainbow Dash replied, folding her hooves behind her head. Applejack just gave a little grunt and shake of her head.

Twilight Sparkle looked out the window and just frowned in concern.

* * *

"That's very good, Diamond Tiara. You must keep your head high, but stable. That's it, Silver Spoon. Lift those hooves with each step," Rarity said as she watched the young fillies walking in careful circles with books balanced on their heads through her cleared off workspace. The pair screwed up their faces with concentration.

"What do we have to do this for? It's sooooo stupid!" Silver Spoon whined as she carefully stepped over rolls of cloth, tripping up enough for the book to tumble off her head. "Urrrgh!"

"Now now. Your parents want you to look like proper ladies. That requires focus and discipline," Rarity replied primly. She lifted the book with her magic to set atop her head and casually strolled over each roll. The book didn't quiver in the slightest as Rarity turned and gave a slow and graceful dance over the rolls of silk.

For a moment she could almost hear the music.

The door opened and admitted Twilight Sparkle. Rarity's hoof caught on a roll, and for a horrible second she was about to fall. Then she recovered with a tight twist, the book still balanced perfectly atop her purple curls. Even Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon looked impressed as she bowed her head without it shifting. "And THAT, ladies, is why you have to practice doing this. It is the first step towards grace."

After that she escorted the two fillies from Carousel Boutique and returned to Twilight Sparkle, she let out her breath and sighed in relief, "Thank you for saving me from that pair. Another comment about how something was 'stupid' and I'd have punted them."

"You're welcome, but why are you tutoring them in the first place? Doesn't Sweetie Belle... well... hate them?"

"She's with her friends tonight at Fluttershy's. I'm tutoring the pair as best as I'm able on dignity and proper gracefulness as high society requires," Rarity said with a sigh, "Personally I'd rather teach a diamond dog etiquette."

“Well why are you doing it then ?” Twilight Sparkle asked softly.

Rarity’s eyes darted about a moment as she fished for an excuse. “Well, it’s not precisely a trouble. And there is some compensation from their parents.”

“You’re tutoring them for money?” Twilight Sparkle asked incredulously. Rarity’s curls seemed to tighten before her eyes.

“Yes! Fine. I admit it. I’m passing on the skills I’ve learned for money. Twenty bits a night. Filthy lucre. There, happy?” She asked sharply as she stomped around the work shop and started to levitate the rolls of fabric back onto the shelves. “I’m sorry that my gift was so ‘chintzy’. I’ll get you something appropriate later.”

“Rarity! The gift is fine,” Twilight Sparkle said as she magically gripped a roll of purple cloth and interrupted Rarity’s furious cleaning. Twilight walked around to look her in the eye and saw the pain and worry within. “I don’t mind a journal. ” Rarity let go of the fabric with her magic, and Twilight Sparkle set it aside. Their eyes met, and Twilight Sparkle gave a gentle smile, “But clearly, something about this bothers you. Tell me.”

Rarity backed away, her hooves tapping nervously beneath her. “Twilight Sparkle... It’s not something I can talk about.”

“You’re not... broke, are you?” Twilight Sparkle asked as she looked around the store at all the fantastic fabrics.

“No!” It wasn’t the volume of her rejection that made Twilight Sparkle retreat. In Rarity’s eyes were a fear. A pain. Something that Twilight Sparkle had never seen before in the confident Rarity. For a moment Twilight Sparkle thought that the elegant white pony was going to do... something. Scream. Cry. But before her eyes Rarity recovered. It was as if all she saw was brushed behind a veil and Rarity was once more simply Rarity. “No, Twilight Sparkle. I will never be like that again.”

“Again?” Rarity closed her eyes and Twilight Sparkle knew the unicorn was kicking herself. “Please Rarity. You can talk with me about anything. We’re friends... You know that, right?”

"Friends," Rarity said solemnly for a moment. Rarity looked at her friend and then turned away, "It's nothing. No matter at all!" She said firmly as she walked to the window to look out at the setting sun, her eyes distant. "It's in the past. It should stay there."

"But it's hurting you now, Rarity."

Rarity didn't answer that as she gazed out the window. "I can almost hear the music some nights. Badum ba-da-dum-dum..." She sang softly. "I can still see the ponies all in their fine dresses and coats dancing in neat rows. Elegant waltzes. Saucy tangos. Schottisches. Branles. Pavaues and Minuets. Elaborate dishes with an entire meal distilled to a single bite of exquisite flavor. And the gossip, oh the gossip! Unending and all so trivial but so tantalizingly vital." Blue eyes looked at her friend with a sad smile, "You haven't a clue what I'm talking about, do you?"

"Um... no. Not really." Twilight Sparkle said softly with a sheepish smile.

"I'm talking about being rich. Fantastically wealthy. Of having so much that you could never want for a trifle." She then looked over to a small dusty chest and her horn glowed. The lock clicked, lid lifted, and Rarity lifted a dingy, battered book with her horn. It hovered in front of her as it turned over in the air. "I don't know why I held on to this. There's nothing in here that I want to remember," she said as she ran her hoof over the water stained cover. Gold fleck still clung to the corners, and there was a hint of lace still clutched to the edge. "I suppose that it's a part of me, no matter how much I dislike it. Here." She levitated the book to Twilight Sparkle. "It should answer your questions."

* * *

Dear Journal,

I refuse to refer to this as a diary. Sunsparkle seemed to think this was an adequate gift for my birthday. From the teasing my guests gave her about purchasing me a 'diary' it's clear that a diary is something for common ponies. It was an adequate party with adequate cake and

adequate presents and adequate music. Madam LeFleur told me that adequate is a word that fancy ponies use all the time. This has been an adequate entry in an adequate journal.

Personally, I don't think there's much point to writing in this. Madam LeFleur will probably just make me walk with it on my head. Sooooo stupid.

~~Your owner Rarity.~~

~~The spectacular Rarity.~~

~~The one and only Rarity.~~

Simply Rarity.

Dear Journal,

We took a day trip down to the marketplace today, just mother and father and me. Apparently I am going to be having a little sister. This simply will not do and I informed mother and father of this immediately. I do not want a sister. If I'm Rarity then if I have a sister I'll be half as rare! Father and Mother seemed angry, but they didn't argue for a change. It seems as if they are trying to be very happy right now. I don't see why. I am quite unhappy with the whole arrangement!

Something simply must be done!

Simply Rarity.

Dear Journal,

Ooh I could just kick the cook, if it weren't so unlady like. My friends came over and she tried to serve us sugared grass instead of alfalfa. Can you imagine? She gave some lame excuse of not having any. Why doesn't she just go out and buy some more? It was a complete scandal and I know that Silvercrest and Opalescence will be reminding me of this faux pas forever!

In spite of that, we did have a delightful time playing Princesses and Prince. Silvercrest is still insisting that when we are grown, she'll be the one to marry Prince Blueblood. The nerve! Every pony knows that I'm destined to marry him. We also gave advice to Sunsparkle about how to handle boys. The silly dear needs to learn to flutter her lashes more.

Simply Rarity.

Dear Journal,

Madam LeFleur had an argument with mother today about not being paid. I thought it rather silly. Mother is about to be another mother and is quite cross about most things. She even yelled at me for making too much

noise practicing my dancing. Mother will simply pay Madam LeFleur later. I've been putting a lot of practice into Madam LeFleur's dancing and etiquette lessons. I've even been practicing my enunciation, which means speaking like a proper filly and not like some apple farming bumkin. According to Madam LeFleur, only the poorest and most slovenly ponies actually farm. Can you imagine getting dirty? I'd rather die.

I do hope mother and father stop arguing. It's quite trying some nights. Perhaps they'll stop once my new sister arrives.

Simply Rarity.

Dear Journal,

I know it hasn't been as long as before, but I have little else to do. My sister is here and her name is Unique. Can you imagine! They may as well have told me I'm common garbage. I adamantly insisted they send her back at once, but mother became very cross with me. Father became cross with her. She became cross with him. It all ended with the foal quite cross!

I hoped I might spend time with Silvercrest or Opalescence, but suddenly all my friends are quite busy! I can't quite put my horn on it, but it's like they're suddenly embarrassed to be my friends! I can't even manage three words to them before they have some excuse. Mother quite angrily said that we'd find some true friends!

I hope mother and father stop arguing soon. It makes my head hurt to hear them shouting at one another.

Simply Rarity.

Dear Journal,

I have never had a more miserable time in my life! I was secretly quite thrilled to learn that I wouldn't have to put up with Madam LeFleur's lessons on enunciation and elocution, but I found out that the cook and the cleaning ponies have left the house as well. There was no pony to draw my bath this morning, can you imagine?

Mother was quite beside herself. I told her that she should simply get a new cook and servants. For a moment I thought she was going to yell at me, but instead she began to weep. This will teach me to keep ~~my mouth shut~~ my opinions to myself. Mother and father have been trying to have their friends over every night, but the few that do visit are positively rude! They eat the food and then immediately leave. Father just stands there in the door, watching them go. I know mother is a terrible cook but there's no

excuse for crude manners. He should but his hoof down and tell them not to be rude. That's what I'd do.

Silvercrest told me the nastiest lie yesterday night. She said that father and mother have no money. That we're poor and that's why all the servant ponies left and no one will be my friend anymore. I said that she was a horrible liar and a terrible friend. We can't be poor. We have a big house and I have all my dresses. I'm even going to the Grand Galloping Gala! Poor ponies don't go to that. Perhaps I'll meet a prince.

Simply Rarity.

Dear Journal,

Everything's been so quiet. Father and mother don't argue any more. They don't do anything. Mother spends hours around Unique. Father just looks at papers for hours and hours on end. Mother doesn't have most of her fancy dresses or jewels any more. I loved her jewels. They were so bright and cheery. She said she was clearing out space, so I told her she could take my dresses too. She just looked at me and started to cry. I don't see what the bother is. I never see my ~~friends~~ former friends anymore and mother seems to need to get rid of things.

I was wrong about the arguing. I'd rather hear mother and father yelling than all this quiet.

Thank you for listening to me, Journal.

Simply Rarity.

Dear Journal,

Something is terribly wrong with father. I was playing with Unique in the ballroom and Unique was babbling and being generally agreeable. Then I spotted father watching us with a look most peculiar. I don't know quite how to put it into words. A statue? No. He was like... a ghost.

He walked in and Unique babbled at him for a bit. I suggested in passing that Unique was getting big enough for her first baby dress and asked him if we might go to market to shop for her. He looked as if he was in pain! Then he simply retreated to his study. He spends all his time there with those papers. Why would any pony write in red?

I will talk with mother about it tomorrow.

Simply Rarity.

~~Dear Journal,~~

~~Terrible accident. Father fell out the third story window from his study~~

Dear Journal,

I'm sorry for crying on that last entry. I've been taking care of Unique while mother gets us ready to move to a smaller house. I thought I'd be mad, but taking care of her is better than thinking about what happened. Windows should stay locked. I spent time in the upstairs ball room going over the dances Madam LeFleur taught me, showing them to Unique. She simply sucks on her hoof, the silly thing.

Mother refuses to talk about father. ~~When I asked about the accident she hit me~~ I will simply not think about it. I won't be sad to leave this house. It doesn't feel like home any more. The rooms are all empty and echo when you walk past. I found one of my old cloaks in a cupboard. It still fits, though I stuck myself with a sewing needle left in the hem. I bundled it up into my saddle bag. It may come in useful.

Unique really isn't all that bad.

Simply Rarity.

Dear Journal,

This new house is certainly... cozy. I won't say its bad because when I did that mother wept for nearly an hour. I'm sharing a room with Unique and she's fussy, but I told her we simply must make the best of it. She simply babbled at me, but I think she understood. I've tried to make sure everything is neat and clean. Madam LeFleur said dirt was the mark of poor ponies. We might be in a small house but we're not that.

Mother is giving etiquette lessons to some of the fillies and colts in this neighborhood for money. She doesn't have very many students. The ponies in this neighborhood don't like us much. They call us 'snooty ponies'. I am not snooty. I know snooty. If I introduced them to Silvercrest they'd never call me snooty again.

Simply Rarity.

Dear Journal,

These common ponies are incomprehensible. They play in the street or empty lots with balls, sticks, and hoops. I've tried to be friendly, yet these children shy away from me with distrust. I try to discuss things like fancy dresses, balls, and dances and they simply look at me as if I'm babbling. I tried drawing in a filly with talk about the Grand Galloping Gala, but she was utterly disinterested! Doesn't she know a *prince* attends?

I've found that boys are much easier to confound with a bit of praise. A flutter of the eyes and a sweet smile and they've been generous enough to provide some assistance: milk for Unique, a few treats and trinkets, even

some cloth that I've tried to turn into shawls for myself and Unique. Yet for some odd reason, they're always angry the next day. I think they're starting to avoid me.

Simply Rarity.

Dear Journal,

It's been terrible here. Everything is quiet again. Mother yelled at two of her students and now they've all quit. Mother cries all the time now. She tried working in some shop, but I guess being rich she doesn't know how to do anything. ~~I don't know how to do anything.~~

I went to my friends and asked them for help. They were all so terrible. They laughed at my scuffed up mane and my chipped hooves. Let them live where I do and see if they keep their manes nice and clean. Except I want to be clean. I want to be pretty. I hate it, but I want to be like them. Silvercrest said she'd pay me five bits to do something horrible. I suggested what she could do with her bits. The local ponies have quite the colorful vocabulary.

Sunsparkle gave me her mother of pearl mane comb. I told her that her journal was the best present I ever recieved.

Simply Rarity.

Dear Journal,

Mother is gone all the time now. She leaves late and sometimes isn't back till dawn. She seems so sad. No. Not sad. Empty. She doesn't even want to see Unique. She brings us things to eat; usually wormy apples or foul lettuces. Unique and I walk all the way to the park to eat grass, but it's tough and makes my tummy ache. Unique needs milk; the grass makes her sick. The money from the comb is gone.

I take care of Mother and Unique now. I try to keep mother comfortable and Unique quiet. I'm trying to teach her how to walk with a book on her head, like Madam LeFleur taught me. I think I'll tuck a few strands of her mane here. When she's bored of that, I'll dance for her. She can't waltz, but I can't waltz well either. I made a horn puppet with that needle from my cloak. It makes her laugh.

I love her laugh.

Simply Rarity.

Dear Journal,

Mother's been gone for three days. I've asked about her, but no pony knows where she went. Some mean colts said she'd left forever because she doesn't want us anymore.

She'll come home soon. We're out of everything but grass and a little milk.

Simply Rarity.

Dear Journal,

We don't have a house anymore! Some pony came while Unique and I were out looking for mother and threw everything in a pile outside the front door! Now it's all locked tight and what little we had is broken or taken. I'm so glad no one took you, Journal. I found Unique's horn puppet, my cloak, and some milk in a bottle.

We're staying with Stone Walker, one of the ponies whose foal took lessons from mother. Unique and I don't really have a room, but there's a niche in the corner of the basement we're staying in. I tried to clean it as best I could. I think that Stone Walker didn't understand why I simply had to clean up her basement. I'd clean up the rest of the house if she liked, but she has so many children that they would just mess everything up.

Unique said 'Warity'. ~~I've never cried so much in my life.~~ I was quite touched.

Simply Rarity.

Dear Journal,

Stone Walker threw us out of her home. I told her how her husband kept brushing against my flank. She called me a horrible liar and said I was just like mother. I cried and beat my hooves on the door but she never opened it. I don't think any pony here will take us in. I don't know what to do.

I went to my friends again. I'll do all the horrible things Silvercrest wants. I couldn't get in though. The servants all pretended not to know me, even though I called them by name. Even Sundancer's family wouldn't help, but their cook did give me three bottles of milk for Unique and some honey muffins for me. Then I was told to never come back. I don't think I could bear to.

I hope I can find some ink.

Just Rarity.

Dear Journal,

We're staying at a place called a shelter. It's not more than a big empty room with dirty hay on the floor, but it's warm and dry. There's so many ponies here just like us. Old, young, Unicorn, Pegasus, Earth, but we're all dirty. Sometimes there's clean water for a bath. The ponies that keep the shelter are so very kind. But I can tell they want to take Unique away. They say they can find us a new home with good parents, but they could find a home for Unique faster alone. I can't lose Unique.

I try and fix whatever I can with my needle. There are so many clothes with rips and tears that every pony needs something sewn. I try and make it look pretty. Everything might be dirty, but it doesn't have to be ugly too. It makes them smile when they see something pretty added to it.
Just Rarity.

Dear Journal,

We left the shelter. Some ponies said I had to give up Unique. She's too young to be with me, and I'm too young to care for her. I'll care for her! I'll do everything I can for her. I had to kick and bite when they tried to separate us. I don't think they expected me to put up a fight, but I did.

I don't know what we'll do, but I won't let anything happen to Unique.
Just Rarity.

Dear Journal,

The little bottle of ink from the shelter is almost empty. I added water to what remains for this entry. Unique and I were attacked, and not by some stranger. They were boys from the neighborhood we used to live in! They *knew* us! They tried to take Unique's cloak not because they needed it, but because they could!

Never have I been so outraged! I kicked, bit, shoved, and called them the most polysyllabic insults I could think of at the time. They fled, I think, more afraid that I fought at all than any damage I actually caused. Unique was *quite* impressed.

Just Rarity.

Dear journal,

Sorry to use charcoal, but it's free. Unique and I walk around all the time. It's all there is to do. If we're not walking, soon the horrible feelings inside build up and I want to cry. I can't cry. I can't. If I cry then Unique will too and she's trying so very hard not to cry. We're both so filthy. We can't keep clean. We try, Journal. We try so hard!

I have to find some milk for Unique. She still can't handle grass.

Rarity.

Dear diary,

We can't stay here any longer. We simply can't. It's not about money any more. It's us.

Unique found three bits in the gutter. Filthy. Dirty. But it was money. I went straight to a milk vendor to purchase three bottles. He told us to leave. We weren't begging. We showed him the money! Still he refused and insisted we go. He was embarrassed to sell to two filthy young ponies! We went to three others before we found a vendor willing to sell two bottles to us.

But it's more than that. I fear that we're becoming invisible. Ponies simply don't look at us any more. They see, but their eyes are fixed. They talk louder when they pass, as if afraid we might ask them for help. Those ponies who do see are even worse. They glare as if sure we'll take something! And worst of all... ponies who think we're funny. Like we chose to be like this. Like we want to be like this.

Rarity.

Dear diary,

We're not in town anymore. No pony likes us there anyway. We're outside town where there's far more grass than in the park, even if it's all yellow. We stopped by a farm and the cows were very nice. They gave Unique all the milk she could drink.

I wonder what happened to mother. Did she have an accident, like father? I sometimes tell Unique that mother was whisked away by an evil witch and that someday she'll come back. It doesn't feel like a lie. I want it to be true so much, and it makes Unique happy. I tell her we're going to look for mother and it makes her smile.

I want to stay at the farm, but I know the look the farmers gave us. It's the same look.

Still, Unique and I are full and the fallen leaves are far more comfortable than I'd ever imagined. Even the moon and stars are so much lovelier than in town.

Rarity.

Dear Diary,

For the first time in months I feel clean. It's the warmest day we've felt thus far, and Unique and I found a stream in which to bathe. I know

we're still a sight. I look at mud and my stomach simply clenches. I think I might have an allergy to dirt. Can you imagine anything so silly?

I miss mother and father so much.

Rarity.

Dear diary,

I've been told this road leads to another town. I told Unique that mother's probably there waiting for her. She doesn't like walking. I keep reminding myself she's a new sister. I carry her as best I can. I took apart the horn puppet to patch up my cloak and stuff it with leaves. I even sewed on some particularly pretty acorns. Unique was so happy. She called herself a princess.

She should be a Princess.

I read about how I felt about her before. She's a Princess. She's sweet and kind and wonderful and I'm not.

Rarity.

Dear Diary,

It's snowing again. It never snowed like this before. It's so beautiful and Unique is entranced. We danced together as it fell upon us, like a ball for only the two of us. She's Princess Unique. I'm Princess Rarity. Our hooves leave tracks across the still woods. She's so very happy. It's getting cold though as we only have one cloak. We both try to fit under it as we make our way through the snow.

I hope we find someplace warm soon. Unique is cold from our dancing.

Rarity.

der dary

unique

Dear Diary,

I was found in the woods and taken to a farm. I wish they hadn't. I wish they'd left me with her. They keep trying to feed me apples and clean me up but it doesn't matter. One of the girls here keeps trying to be nice. I don't deserve her being nice to me. I call her stupid hateful things, like I'm Silvercrest. Her parents know I don't mean it, but I think she's mad with me. Her red brother is quiet. He leaves me alone. I think he understands.

I can't stay here. I don't deserve to stay here, but they won't let me go till spring. I still have my needle. I'll sew some things up for them. I can do that at least.

~~I miss Unique I miss mother and father I hate being here I hate being alone I hate the pity and the looks and the crying I hate the kindness that I don't deserve I hate myself for being here when unique isn't I hate~~

Dear Diary,

I'm in this new place, Ponyville. It's much smaller than where we used to live. Every pony is nice to me because they know what happened to Unique. They try and give me things, but I won't take them. I told them my name is Silvercrest. My mane is filthy and tangled and dirty. I hate it. It's what I deserve. I don't think I can stay here. I don't think I can stay anywhere.

Rarity

Silvercrest.

Dear Diary,

I have a job. There's a seamstress here who makes a living mending clothes. A widow named Thimble. She's heard I'm good with a needle and so I'm helping her. She has a room. I told her that I'd pay to stay there. I won't let her just let me stay. I won't. So I sew up simple things and she lets me stay.

I keep thinking about what happened. Everything that's happened. I think about throwing this journal away. Even burning it. But I can't. But I also can't stop thinking about it!

I told her a little about me. She said that it was silly to give up my name. That I was a Rarity. That no pony my age had been through what I had and kept going. It made me feel better. She's going to let me practice with her sewing machine.

Rarity.

Dear Diary,

I met Silvercrest and Sunsparkle today.

Silvercrest's family were passing through on their way to the Grand Galloping Gala when Silvercrest ripped the hideous pink thing she called a ball room dress. She resembled a fat pig with green ribbons. Pink and lime green? How did she ever think that would look good? I felt so bad for

Sunsparkle, stuck with Silvercrest as she whined about how unfair it was her dress had ripped.

A dress. A ripped dress was unfair. I had to focus or I feared I would scream and throttle her!

Sunsparkle's own garb was decent enough. It was so hard for me to mention that with just a few less ribbons it could be so much more. Silvercrest was, of course, rude while Thimble sewed up the tear. How could I know proper pony fashion? A few ribbons less though made such a difference. A braid in her mane that pulled her hair out of her eyes and emphasized her throat helped wonderfully.

When they were leaving, I thanked her for her comb. She had no idea what I was talking about. Still, I hope she has a good time at the Gala. Maybe she'll meet a prince.

Rarity.

Dear Diary,

Thimble asked to adopt me. I'm not sure how to feel. I know she cares for me. ~~She pities me.~~ I think she might even love me a little. Yet when I think of family, a gulf opens wide inside me. I remember mother and father yelling. I remember father's ~~suicide~~ accident. Snow. It hurts. And I'm afraid that if I accept then somehow I'll make the bad things that happened to me happen to her.

It's silly, but I am so afraid.

Rarity.

Dear Diary,

Thimble is going to have a baby. I'm going to have to take over most of the chores running the shop. There's so much to remember! Still, I've figured out the sewing machine.

Misses Muffin wants a wedding dress made. She's marrying Mr. Cake in their very bakery. It was supposed to be just a simple affair. White with white. It took so long for me to mention, in passing, that perhaps she might like a new dress. Something... better. I never expected her to agree! Now I have to design an entire dress!

Yet, despite everything I have to admit I'm excited! I've never done anything like it before. Even Thimble's never designed an entire dress, but when I close my eyes I can almost see it. And it's strange but when I focus on doing this... I don't think about... other things.

Oh what have I gotten myself into?

Miss Rarity.

Dear Diary,

The dress was an utter disaster. The hem was uneven and the embroidery was simply awful. I nearly tore the whole thing to pieces. Somehow Miss Muffin adored the ghastly thing! It was so hard, but I had to concentrate! I had to focus on every little detail. That's how I know it was terrible.

She paid me twenty bits for it.

I've never actually earned money before. Money. It should have been important to me but when it jingled in my hoof it seems... stupid. I know that's silly. Money's the most important things in the world. If we'd had money ~~father wouldn't have killed~~ many troubles could have been avoided. I tried to give it to Thimble, but she said I'd all ready paid my rent and it'd been all my work. I'd earned that money.

Mother and Father would have spent it. I would have spent it. Money was for spending, yet... I'll save it. Perhaps something important will come up.

Tailor Rarity.

Dear Diary,

Thimble had her baby! She's... everything. Everything precious and delicate and sweet. I said she should be named Sweetie Belle. She looks just like her mother with her pink mane, but Thimble says she looks like me. I couldn't say who she really looks like. I cried so much once I was back in my room. It hurt so much. But I'm still going to make her a horn puppet. I focus on every stitch, so I don't think about the old memories.

It hurts to be a big sister again, but that's what I'll be for her.

I have to.

Sister Rarity.

Dear Diary,

I've used up so many of your pages that I'm nearly out. I never thought I'd ever fill this to the very end. It makes me sad; isn't that silly?

Thimble is making me go to school. It seems silly given that I've all ready been tutored adequately in enunciation and elocution. No, it's not silly. It's scary. I've been on my own for so long that the idea of being around other ponies scares me. I don't want to make friends like Silvercrest again, and I know there are ponies like her. Maybe not as rich, but every bit as mean.

Still, if I must, I'll wash as well as I can. I want to look clean and neat. I bought a roll of fabric from Thimble and made myself a dress. It's simple enough. I try to brush up on everything that Madam LeFleur taught me.

Who knows, it may be okay.

Nervous Rarity.

Dear Diary,

!! HATE!! APPLEJACK!!!

I was at school and it was... well... not so bad. Not so bad, that is, till an Earth Pony named Applejack asked me if I wanted to 'play'. Applejack doesn't play. She mucks around in mud puddles, kicks apples to splatter other ponies with sticky pulp, and wrestles. My dress is RUINED FOREVER! I called her a barbaric filthophile. She laughed and said I talked funny. Funny!

I think... I think she might be her. That one pony I met over the winter. She doesn't seem to recognize me, though.

Well. Dress aside... it wasn't all bad. ~~Perhaps I'll make friends with Applejack in time and teach her how to be a proper lady.~~ Never mind. Some ponies are incapable of cleanliness.

Clean Rarity.

Dear Diary,

Boys are terribly silly ponies, aren't they? Apparently I'm quite a popular topic for them as they do whatever boys do. I remember everything that Madam LeFleur told me and they find simple manners and grace quite fetching. Yet, I'm far more careful this time. I remember what happened before, and keep them at a hoof distance. Politely. Like a lady.

It's been so long, I'm surprised that I remember how.

Lady Rarity.

Dear Diary,

The school is holding a play about the seasons. I don't really want to participate. I'm not an actress. However, I have to admit their costumes are... well... lacking. All right, they're terrible. But they don't have to be. Perhaps I can help sew something new. It has to be more than good though. I want it to be spectacular!

Fidgeting Rarity

Dear Diary,

I GOT MY CUTIEMARK TODAY! What happened was

Dear Diary,

I can't believe I was so excited I spilled ink all over the page. I'll write the details later.

I saw a homeless pony. He was older than me, but not full grown. Ponyville doesn't have a lot of homeless ponies, they're mostly just passing through on their way to somewhere else. He had... well... that look. That empty eyed look that made him painful to look at. Was I ever as dirty as that? Did I ever smell like that? I did. I know I did.

I made him a blanket and used some of my money to buy him something to eat and an old brush. He looked at me like I was a ghost or something. He started to cry. I know it's hard for boys to cry, so I left him alone after that. I hope he finds somewhere to belong.

I am so lucky. Thimble has given me... no, not given. I have to remember that. What she gave me was an opportunity. Just like I gave that pony an opportunity. I hope he makes it.

Happily Rarity.

Dear Diary,

Thimble is remarrying. I feel quite overwhelmed. The loss of her husband and... my loss... helped us stay together. Now she's moving on with her life. I should be happy for her. I should.

I'm not. I feel... terrified.

Only Thimble knows what I've been through and she says I'm strong, but I don't feel strong. I'm afraid that without her I'll fall apart again. She simply tells me to make some friends and to simply continue doing what I've been doing: living. It sounds so simple, so why am I so afraid?

Cowardly Rarity,

Dear Diary,

I'm alone again. Thimble and Sweetie Belle have left and I'm left in this great building. Thimble wants to sell it to me, but right now I can't think of sewing. I can't think of anything.

No, that's not true. I keep thinking of Unique. I keep thinking of father lying in the courtyard. I keep thinking of the last day I saw mother leave that filthy little house.

I don't want to be alone. I'm sorry. I'll write when I'm less troubled.

Rarity

Dear Diary,

Sweetie Belle has returned. Thimble has said that she found Canterlot a fine city, but overwhelming for the young pony. Apparently Sweetie Belle was quite inconsolable. The simple solution is for her to stay with me until she's older and decides where she wants to live.

I didn't know what else I could say besides yes. Yet as I think about it, I think it the right decision. I can't let what happened to Unique happen to Sweetie Belle. I have to focus and force these maudlin ideas from my head. And oddly enough, I can. In caring for Sweetie Belle I can care for myself as well.

Is that courage?
Ambivalent Rarity.

Dear Diary,

Thimble is getting married and moving to Canterlot. I was happy, but I admit to being nervous. She's helped so much, and even now she's still helping. She sold me her tailoring shop. From now on this business is mine, for the price of designing her wedding dress and two dresses for Sweetie Belle and myself. I know it's a token, but it's still a part of her promise.

Looking at the shop, I just have pictures of how it could be. I'll move the workshop upstairs and turn the ground floor into a boutique! I'll design clothes for every pony for a hundred miles. My talent for fashion has also been assisted by a knack for locating gemstones. Certainly extraction is a problem, but I'll figure something out!

And I've also decided something else. I've decided what to do with my money from the shop. Some of it will go to paying the bills and buying materials, certainly. Some of it I will save for Sweetie Belle. One day she will know what she wants to do with her life, and when she does I will do all I can to help her as Thimble helped me.

But the rest I'm going to give away. There are so many ponies across Equestria who are poor and hurting. I could hoard the bits and perhaps someday even have the lifestyle mother and father enjoyed, but I don't want it. I'll use my excess to buy winter cloaks, food, milk, and help fund shelters across Equestria. I don't want to be rich again. I've been rich. If I can help other ponies from poverty, I will.

Sincerely Rarity.

Dearest Diary,

This is your final page. I never imagined in my wildest dreams that my greatest friend would ever be a book of my own writing. I know how

vain that sounds, but it's true. At the very worst times, and the very best, you've been with me. You're proof of all that I've gone through.

I don't imagine I'll ever share you with another. Not even Sweetie Belle. So if any pony is reading this, then I can only say that you are the greatest of my friends. I hope that in reading this, you understand a little bit about me. If I seem reluctant to discuss my past, or evade questions about my relationship to Sweetie Belle, or act odd about money; you can now understand why.

And so, I can only hope that you will also understand to never discuss it with me. The memories are too raw to speak of. I don't want praise for my generosity or charity. I don't deserve praise. Had I been truly generous I would have let the shelter take Unique away. What I do to help others is my repayment for all the help that's been given to me. If at times I seem reluctant to waste money, please understand that there are many ponies who will never realize how wealthy they truly are to those who have nothing.

So, mysterious reader, thank you for taking this time and making the effort to understand a pony undeserving of your friendship.

Sincerely, surely, simply,
Rarity.

* * *

Twilight Sparkle stared down at that final page. Framing it were two length of silky soft mane, one a delicate blue violet similar to Rarity's, but not, and the other a soft pink and purple. Twilight Sparkle ran her hoof along both strands, touching the two sisters in Rarity's life. Slowly she closed the book, levitated it, and brought it to her lips. She kissed it softly and then set it aside. She'd make sure it returned to its owner.

In the dark evening light she looked towards her bag and her horn glowed. The flap lifted and she drew out the simple blank journal. She opened it up in front of her, turning to the very first page. Magic lifted her pen and with the softest of smiles began to write.

Dear Diary,

Today was my birthday, and I got many wonderful gifts from my friends. One friend, however, gave me far more than simple presents. First, she gave me you. Secondly, she gave me a story that she's never shared with another. And third, she gave me an appreciation for just what

generosity truly means. Thanks to her I appreciate all I have all the more, and hope that one day I can be as caring a soul as she.

Sincerely, surely, simply,
Twilight Sparkle.

* * *

In the late night Rarity's sewing machine softly purred. The blankets were simple, but when winter came they would be comfortable, durable, and most importantly warm. Mrs. Cake had collected all the left over pastries from Pinkie Pie's party and sent them in a basket. They'd reach their destination a bit stale, but still edible. And while no pony in the shelter would know who 'parkle' was on the birthday cake, that wouldn't stop them from appreciating it. Maybe they'd think that 'parkle' sent the money along with the package. Maybe not. All that mattered was that some pony would be helped.

She hoped it wasn't a mistake to give out that book, but she thought she could trust Twilight Sparkle. On this, at least, she wouldn't blab her secrets. Sweetie Belle would be back tomorrow. She had to be careful. She wanted to give her sister everything; the whole world if she could, but Rarity knew what came of that. You couldn't give everything you wanted. Not even love, or it would hurt.

She gazed out the window, singing softly under her voice, "Badum ba-da-dum-dum..." As she sang she remembered the dance with her sister in the empty ball room. Hoof in hoof, whirling gaily, like they never would again save for that one last time...

Slowly she lifted the lid of the chest and reached down. The leaves were terribly brittle stuffed within the faded red winter coat. There were so many stains and splotches it was hard to make out the original color. Her hoof softly nudged a dry acorn still tied to the edge. Gently, as gently as she'd stroked her sisters' manes when they were foals, she ran her hoof over the garment. Then she closed the lid with a sigh.

Someday she might give it to Sweetie Belle, or, perish the thought, a child of her own. It was everything she would ever be. Would ever hope to be. And so she adjusted her glasses, wiped away any lingering tears, and continued her work; being all that she was.

Simply Rarity.

Thicker Than Water

Today was a day for winners! A blue streak trailing a rainbow launched through the skies over Ponyville in swoops and banks that dared the eyes of every pony to simply try and follow her. One last lap brought her completely around the lap to flash past Fluttershy so quick that Dash's jetwash almost blew her from Rainbow Dash's cloud home. Digging in with her hooves, Fluttershy was almost unable to hit the stop watch button in time.

"Did you get it? Did I get it?" Rainbow Dash said as she flew back and snatched the watch, jerking poor Fluttershy by the neck as her rose eyes picked out the time. "Yes! Two seconds off my time!" She said as she danced on the clouds, pumping her hooves enthusiastically in above her.

"Yay," Fluttershy joined in with a warm smile, "Woot."

"This is my best time yet, I think. I'm going to nail that preliminary try out for the Wonderbolts tomorrow for sure." She said with a laugh as she looked at her carefully arranged cloud loops. "I think I got the whole Misty Falls course laid out in perfect detail." She said as she put up her hooves to judge the positions... well, it worked for Pinkie Pie.

"Why are they having the try outs there? I mean I'm glad our friends can come without magic, but it seems a little out of the way." Misty Falls were the highest water falls in all of Equestria just south of Ponyville.

"Well they can't have every trial and try out in Cloudsdale. This is just a little test to make sure I'm worth the Wonderbolt's time. If I can't even finish the course then what good am I?" Rainbow Dash asked as she flicked her mane out of her eyes.

A gray and blond pegasus swooped in on Rainbow Dash's home, smacking into the side of the clouds with a soft 'whump'. Then a hoofful of mail popped up over the edge. "Mail!" The pegasus called out cheerfully.

"Thanks Ditzy," Rainbow Dash said as she took it in her mouth while Fluttershy helped pull Ditzy Doo up on to the cloud. Rainbow Dash flipped through the mail, looking at the stamps. "Jeeze, Ditzy. Some of these are from last month. What happened?"

"Muffins?" the gray pegasus with walleyed expression suggested with a sheepish smile and shrug.

“Junk. Junk. Junk.” Suddenly Rainbow Dash froze as she lifted one envelope. “Oh... oh no...they found me...” Her pupils contracted as she tore open the top and pulled out the letter. “Dear Dashie... uh huh... uh huh... wait... When? On...” Her entire body went rigid. “Oh no. No no no no! They can’t! Not today!” And with a yell she took off over Ponyville like a shot.

The letter fluttered down and Fluttershy scooped it up. Her eyes scanned the simple letter. Ditzzy stretched up to peek at it as well. “Okies?”

“No Ditzzy,” Fluttershy said softly. “Not okies.”

The blue blur streaked from Ponyville and out to Happy Apple Acres. Applejack was loading up some crates of the red and gold bounty into a wagon when Rainbow Dash flashed past and into the barn so quick that Applejack whirled, flinging apples in all directions with the crate landing atop her head. “Land sakes! Was that you, Rainbow Dash?” She asked as she took off the crate and trotted inside.

She found Rainbow Dash cowering in the back of an empty cow stall, buried in hay and shaking, “They won’t look for me here. No one would look for me here. Nope... not here...”

“Rainbow Dash, what’s the matter?” She asked as she pushed open the stall door. “You’re actin like ya owe money to the Herd and they’re coming to collect.”

Rainbow’s rictus grin and high pitched laugh made Applejack’s skin prickle. “Oh I just wish it was a little thing like that.” Suddenly she lunged and grabbed Applejack, pulling her close. “You gotta hide me, AJ. I need sanctuary. You hear me? Sanctuary!” She yelled, shaking Applejack in desperation.

Applejack pushed her off as she said, “Well all right! You can hide out here if you gotta, but I hope you’ll tell me what’s going... wait?” Her ears perked as she raised a hoof to her ear. “Is that... singing?”

“Oh no...” Rainbow dashed whimpered, eyes contracting to pin points. She launched herself into the air over Applejack and with a scream flew out the door. Applejack picked herself off the floor and walked after her, but aside from a single errant cloud in the sky and distant singing, she couldn’t for the life of her why some pony singing ‘99 bottles of milk on the wall’ would send Rainbow Dash running for the hills.

Her wings zipped her through Ponyville so quickly that she left blurring lines hovering in the air behind her before flying to Rarity’s boutique, opening the door, and leaping inside. Rarity’s mouth hung open as Dash flashed from outfit to outfit. “Rarity! I need a disguise. Right now! Something girly. Something super girly so that no one would ever think

that it's me. Do you have a dress like that, Rarity? Tell me you have a dress like that!" Rainbow Dash begged as she knelt before the white Unicorn, hooves clasped.

Rarity just stared into her eyes and a slow smile of profound bliss crossed her features. Despite herself, Rainbow Dash gulped.

The lady that stepped from the boutique was draped in silk and lace from a bygone era. Rarity's powdered wig sat atop her head, elegant wide brimmed hat with a veil, and a fine lace parasol clutched under her demure pink wing. She walked with elegance, poise, and dignity. No one could have imagined this stately Pegasus to be a competition obsessed filly named Rainbow Dash... except... perhaps...

"Hi Rainbow Dash!" Pinkie Pie called from behind her, making her jump and round of her friend. "Whatcha doing dressed up like my grandma, Rainbow Dash. Oooh, is it a costume party? Tell me it's a costume party! Oh.... I should throw a costume par-"

She was silenced by Rainbow Dash grabbing her with her hooves and pressed against the wall. "Pinkie Pie." She raised her head to look at Pinkie Pie from under the bridge, a yellow gleam in her eyes as if possessed. "I will never ask you for this again, but promise me... whatever happens... whatever excuse you need to make up... do not throw a party today. Do you understand, Pinkie Pie? Do you promise?" She hissed softly, grin taut on the verge of snapping.

"Well, yeah, sure. I guess I could do that. Could you stop acting like you're going to eat me now?"

Rainbow Dash gave a hysterical little laugh, but then froze. From above someone called out 'you-whoo...', but it wasn't what they called but that voice. She screamed and launched down the street so fast that Pinkie Pie was left spinning in a cloud of makeup and powder; rarity's fancy dress now on her! "What's going on?" Pinkie Pie asked as she looked up, but aside from a sole cloud in the sky moving the same direction as Rainbow Dash there wasn't sign of anything amiss.

No more evasion. She crashed through the door of Twilight Sparkle's library with a wingful of planks and dozens nails in her mouth. Twilight Sparkle looked up as Dash unloaded her wings and then flashed to a window, hammering planks over it. "Dash?"

"OhhiTwilightSparkleyoudon'tmindiflhangouthereawhiledoyouwenevergettohangouttogetherandIthoughtohlookweneedmoreboardshere," Rainbow Dash gasped as she nailed boards over every window and pushed all of Twilight's furniture against the door in ten seconds flat. Twilight's jaw dropped in stunned amazement. Rainbow Dash then flashed

to her with a desperate grin on her face, her rainbow mane frizzling in every direction.

"Hey Twilight Sparkle I was thinking I've never been a unicorn before do you have a spell to turn me into a Unicorn or maybe just a regular pony that looks nothing like Rainbow Dash heck I'll do time as a potted plant as long as you turn me back in time for the preliminaries tomorrow please Twilight Sparkle please please please!"

Twilight Sparkle just looked at her flatly, "What's going on, Dash?"

Suddenly there was a knock on the door and Dash went from rambling to silent as her eyes turned slowly towards the door. "Don't answer that."

Twilight Sparkle looked at her flatly and with a glow of her horn moved aside the furniture. She opened the door a crack, and then gave an annoyed sigh. "It's just Fluttershy, Dash." She pulled the door open wide and Dash warily approached the opening. Then she froze as she saw the white cloud settling down just outside the door. She screamed and leapt into the air, but Twilight's Magic grabbed her. "Do you know what's going on, Fluttershy?"

"Um... yes..." Fluttershy said softly. She stepped aside, looking back at the cloud.

"I'm doomed," Rainbow Dash whimpered as Twilight Sparkle drug her from the library. The cyan Pegasus' hooves left four gouges in the floor. The cloud was attracting a fair number of residents of Ponyville.

Suddenly the side of the cloud kicked open and gave a lurch and from the dark opening emerged the heaviest Pegasus Twilight Sparkle had ever seen. "Woouooo... I guess going through that cloud bank wasn't such a good idea after all, was it honey?" The white Pegasus with a bright rainbow mane declared as her wings fluttered to lift her over the cloud and she flicked away the clouds with her tail, uncovering a shiny metal trailer shaped like a lozenge. "Honey? Honnnney... where are you?"

"Over here sweetie plum, ay?" replied one end of the cloud and the mare flicked away the clouds to uncover a cyan pegasus that was so stout he barely fit in the harness attached to the camper. "Woo... I tell you that was quite a flight, eh? I thought my wings were about to fall right off there a couple of times."

"Aw, who's my big, strong pegasus of steel?" She said fondly as she nuzzled him and smooched him as he took off the harness.

"And who's my little sweet cheese cake, eh?" He replied back.

"Little?" Spike asked skeptically. "Who's he calling little?"

Rainbow Dash was trying to shrink to the point of disappearing. Implosion would be preferable to this. But then the pair spotted her and

grinned widely, "Oh! Oh! Honey! There she is! Our little Dash!" The white mare said as she waived towards her. "You whoo... Dashie Pony!"

"Dashie... Pony..." Twilight Sparkle murmured in bafflement. She stepped aside to look back at the desolate Rainbow Dash. "Rainbow, who are these Pegasi?"

"They're... my parents..." Rainbow Dash groaned as they swept past Twilight Sparkle to give her a hug that almost crushed her between them. "Hi mom... dad..."

* * *

Sugarcube Corner was quite busy to celebrate the arrival of Rainshadow and Lightdancer, and there were lots of ponies who wanted to meet the parents of their own Rainbow Dash. For their part, Rainshadow and Lightdancer were kind, happy, boisterous ponies not afraid to show their affection for each other, nor for their love of the many cakes and pastries presented. Applejack found herself the unexpected recipient of Lightdancer's recipe for apple cheese casserole and Rainshadow talked Rarity's horn off about the fashions, or lack thereof, in Fillygo, way to the north.

"Yah know, in the wintertime it can get so cold that by the time we get home we got icecicles on our wings! Wish we had a little missy like you, but I don't know how we'd be able to have such a drop dead gorgeous mare in our little town, eh?" Rainshadow said, grinning as he glanced to his wife.

"Oh, you should have plenty of experience with me!" Lightdancer replied, with a toss of her rainbow curls.

"Oh, I gots plenty of experience with goddesses o beauty, for sure," he replied with a little nicker and wag of his eyebrows. There were plenty of laughs from the onlookers.

"Oooh, you're just buttering me up!"

In the corner Rainbow Dash was in a slow burn and Twilight Sparkle was hesitant to approach her with Pinkie Pie and Fluttershy. "So... your parents are... um... nice."

Rainbow Dash's rose colored eyes slid over to the purple unicorn's, "Of course they're nice. They're from Fillygo. Every pony is nice there," and her voice shifted to match that of her parents, "Oh don't ya know?" She pointed a hoof at Pinkie Pie, "And you told me no parties today!"

“Me? Oh no no no, Dash. This isn’t my party. Fluttershy is throwing this party. I’m just helping her with all the details.” The pink pony said as she gestured to the pale yellow pegasus, who looked embarrassed.

“Fluttershy? What did I ever do to you?” Rainbow Dash protested. Suddenly Fluttershy looked even more uncertain. Even upset as she trotted off. Twilight frowned sternly at Rainbow Dash and the Pegasus covered her head with her hooves. “Arrrgh... I just can’t win.”

“Maybe you could explain why do don’t like your parents it would help?” Twilight Sparkle said she stood beside her.

“Yeah, they’re a blast compared to my parents.” Pinkie Pie said with a laugh as she pointed, “Look, they’re dancing.” And to the glee of onlookers, the pair was in fact tangoing across the bakery. It was also clear that if either of them once had a talent for dancing, they’d lost it somewhere. Rainbow Dash buried her face in her hooves.

Twilight Sparkle looked at Rainbow Dash, then at her parents. “So, you don’t hate your parents?”

“No. I don’t hate them. I like them just fine when they’re somewhere else.” She said as she sat up with a sigh. “They’re just... just...”

“Funny?” Offered Pinkie Pie.

“Affectionate?” Suggestion Twilight Sparkle.

“Dorks.” Rainbow Dash muttered as she flicked her half eaten cupcake with a wing tip.

“Wait? That’s why you don’t like them?” Twilight Sparkle sat up in shock. “Your parents aren’t cool enough for you?”

Rainbow Dash grumbled. “They’re not just ‘not cool’. They suck everything cool and awesome out of everything around them! They wouldn’t know cool if it bit them on the wings.” She pointed a hoof at Twilight Sparkle, “And don’t give me that look. I know it shouldn’t matter, but it does. There wasn’t a day in Fillygo when we were out that people wouldn’t snicker and laugh. My sisters-“

“You have sisters?” gasped Pinkie Pie with a wide, excited grin.

The look Rainbow Dash gave Pinkie Pie could have stripped paint. “Yes. *Nine*. And don’t bother asking about them because you will never, ever, EVER meet them.” Rainbow Dash looked so ready to bite a head off that Pinkie Pie backed down.

“But what’s wrong with having family like that? I mean I don’t recall my parents being exactly cool...”

Rainbow Dash sighed, “It wasn’t like that. I never had a single friend in Fillygo. I was a joke because my whole family were jokes. Folks would see us coming and yell to make way for the ‘rainbow herd’. And mom and

dad just took it in stride. They liked it. And it wasn't like they went out of their way to try to embarrass me; it's just the way they are."

She looked over to where Rainshadow extended his wing to Apple Bloom. "Hey, kiddo, pull my wing,eh?" Rainbow Dash closed her eyes with a little shutter.

Twilight Sparkle flushed; glad to see Applejack had intercepted Apple Bloom before she took him up on his offer as she looked back at her friend. "Look, I can see how this is awkward for you. But look at it from another perspective; they care enough to come visit you. I haven't even seen my parents in..." Twilight Sparkle suddenly frowned, feeling a little guilty.

"I would have been fine if they'd shown up after the try outs," Rainbow Dash groaned. "I should be practicing now."

"Well go ahead and practice. We've got your parents taken care of." Twilight Sparkle said, and was glad to see a thankful smile appear on Rainbow Dash's face.

"So who wants to see little filly Dashie?" Lightdancer asked, much to the glee of Dash's friends as her mother produced a photo album.

"Oh my, how adorable!" Gushed Rarity at a picture of Dash in a pink baby bonnet next to... Dash? Indeed she was a perfect copy of the cyan equine.

Pinkie Pie pointed at a picture of Dash's rump stuck in the wall of a cloud. Lightdancer chuckled, "Oh yeah, Dashie certainly could make a hole. She could go from zero to dash in the blink of an eye."

Then they got to pictures of Dash in the tub and Rainbow Dash just snorted.

"Right. I'm outta here. I'm just glad it's only mom and dad." She said as she walked quickly to the door. "I couldn't handle it if the whole..." she froze for a second before a storm of Pegasi surged through the door and buried Rainbow Dash in a squealing giggling mass of ponies. All of them had the same cyan coat of Rainshadow and the rose colored eyes of Lightdancer, but each had a mane of a different color.

"Girls! Girls! So glad you could make it. I was getting worried ya might have gotten lost in Canterlot," Rainshadow said as he stomped his hoof twice and the laughing flock of Pegasi climbed off Rainbow Dash, who looked on the verge of an attack of some kind. "Now, why don't cha all fall in there and introduce yourselves to every pony?"

With practice ease they assembled themselves from oldest to youngest, and Twilight Sparkle tried not to laugh as Rainbow Dash got in line. Then she noticed how unhappy Rainbow Dash appeared with her head hanging somewhat.

"Ivory Star," said the first formally, who aside from her white mane looked identical to the second in line. Her cutie mark was of a white eight pointed star.

"Onyx Star," said the second black maned mare, casually crossing her legs beneath her with a casual ease. Her cutie mark matched her sister's in everything save color.

"Diamond Flash," said the third, whose mane was six intermixed colors of red, orange, yellow, green blue, and purple, but it gave her mane a shimmery white appearance. Her resemblance to Rainbow Dash was equally uncanny. Her cutie mark was a multiray burst of rainbow light.

"Rainbow Dash," she said sullenly, earning looks from a number of her siblings. She let out a long sigh and muttered, "Beryl Dash." Applejack mouthed the name silently. Twilight had to agree. *Beryl?*

"She's always doing that. Oh! Ruby Flare," gushed the red maned filly with the scarlet shooting star on her flank. "I'm the nice one."

"Citrine Stare," said a pony with an orange mane and an easy going smile that matched her orange sun cutie mark.

"Topaz Flare," said the next, her spiky bright yellow hair sticking straight up as she looked sharply at her siblings.

"No it isn't Topaz! You're Topaz Glare," snapped a green maned filly about the same age as Apple Bloom, "I'm Emerald Dream."

"Sapphire Stream," murmured a blue maned pony that took a half step behind her green maned sibling.

The last one blinked, screwed up her face, "Am... Ami...the... is... um... Beam!" she finished brightly, and then looked at her mother, "That right, momma?"

"Amethyst Beam, yes sweetie. Nicely done." Lightdancer said to the youngest filly, who smiled at her accomplishment.

Rain Shadow leaned towards Twilight Sparkle and said from behind his hoof, "Trust me, it pays to have a naming plan worked out ahead of time, eh? Twilight Sparkle hoped the blush would eventually fade away as the nine new fillies fanned out and started to chat with the rest of the occupants. Ivory and Onyx chatted with their parents. Ruby and Citrine seemed to have taken a shine to Pinkie Pie and Rarity. Topaz seemed to have latched on to Applejack while Sapphire and Amethyst gravitated towards Fluttershy on the edge of the crowd. Emerald at once started to discuss potential cutie marks with the Cutie Mark Crusaders.

Twilight Sparkle then frowned, wondering where Rainbow Dash had disappeared to. Then she heard her say from behind the purple unicorn, "Looking for Beryl?"

Diamond Flash looked so alike Rainbow Dash, sounded so alike that the Unicorn had to take a second to confirm her multicolored mane was the sparkling iridescence rather than the more solid bands of color. "Actually, her name is Rainbow Dash."

Diamond Flash just shrugged coolly. "If you're looking for her she's skulked off."

"Oh no. She was all ready upset with her parents here," Twilight Sparkle frown at the cyan Pegasus, "All of you dog piling her didn't help."

"Yeah, that was one of Ruby's ideas. She gets a new one a minute," Diamond Flash sighed and walked towards the exit, "Well let's see if I can find where she's holed up this time. Is there a water tower around here?" She asked as she flew up, shielding her eyes with a hoof as she looked around.

"At Apple Acres," Twilight Sparkle replied.

"Well that'd be the place to start," Diamond Flash said as she landed besides Twilight and together they walked along towards the Farm. After exchanging names, Twilight Sparkle was brimming with questions. Unfortunately Diamond Flash didn't seem nearly as open and friendly as her sibling. She walked calm and collected with a strange focus that seemed oddly unnerving.

"So you're Rainbow Dash's sister?"

"Twin, yeah. Except for the mane, thank goodness."

"You seem... different."

"Yeah, that's the cliché, isn't it?" Diamond Flash said with a little sigh. "Dash is flying through walls. Flash is thinking through how to fly. Dash is getting in trouble. Flash is a good girl. Dash is the flyer. Flash the thinker. Our parents ate that garbage up."

"I don't understand," Twilight Sparkle said with a little frown.

"Let me guess. Only child?"

Twilight nodded.

"Then no surprise. Your parents knew you. I mean really knew you. You never had to wonder if your parents would remember your name if you didn't have a mane color that corresponded to their naming gimmick. Or a name that was so uncool that you made one up just to have a name that was yours."

"Well, it's just that you seem... ah..."

"Like I'm not going to try to get stuff done in ten seconds flat?" Diamond Flash said with a small smile. "Like I'm not obsessed with recognition or being cool?"

"Yeah," Twilight admitted.

"You haven't seen me problem solve. It's my talent. I think about things and come to a solution. And I'm really touchy when people don't agree." She said with a sweep of her shimmery rainbow haired tail. "And I can be just as impatient."

"So you are alike?"

"No. I am me and she is she and we are who we are." She gave a soft huff, "Of course everyone wants to compare us, and Dash always gets the short end of the stick. She's always been compared to all the rest of us."

"So why does all of you being here at once freak her out?"

"Wouldn't you be a little freaked out if you had to compete with nine sisters to prove you're good at anything besides messing up?" Flash shrugged, "Dash is who she is because of us. We all are. But it was always harder for Dash. She got saddled with the dorky name. I wonder if we'd had different names would I have been the one to run off just to be my own pony? Calling myself 'Rainbow Flash'? By the time she was born we all ready had Ivory and Onyx as the calm and collected sister and the temperamental sister. I was supposed to be the smart one, according to mom and dad. So that made Dash..."

"Ouch..."

"Still I think we could have been okay with that if the triplets hadn't come along a year later. By that point all of us were desperate to be special. We were loved; we know that, but none of us were really sure we mattered. We'd try and carve out whatever little personality niches we could but that weren't enough for Dash." She said as they crossed the bridge and walked towards the farm. "What really killed her though was when mom and dad couldn't keep us straight. Dash wanted to make a rainbow for mom and dad. She got the materials and painted it. Got the green and blue reversed, but still... do you know what mom and dad said?" Twilight Sparkle just shook her head. "Oh, that's such a pretty rainbow, Diamond Flash. You should try and make one with your sister."

Twilight stopped in her hooves. "They thought she was you?"

"It was just a stupid little mistake, but I think that's when Dash didn't want to be a part of our family any more. She sure didn't want anything to do with me." Diamond flash looked at the clouds with a small smile, "We used to play for hours. She would charge at a cloud and just slide along its surface before flying out the far side. But after that she wanted to be 'Rainbow Dash'. " She sighed as they continued past the gate. "This was all a mistake."

"What, looking for Rainbow Dash?"

"No. My family coming here. Dash doesn't want us here. I tried to explain it to mom and dad, but as soon as they saw Rainbow Dash won the Young Flyer's Competition, they just had to come and bring the whole herd with them," she paused and then scanned the Apple water tower. "There she is," she said as she pointed at the rainbow tail drooping over the edge.

"Huh, I'd have thought she'd picked a cloud or something," Twilight Sparkle said, impressed.

"You don't hide from a Pegasus family in the clouds. First place we'd look. She'd always find some nice high perch she could hide behind," Diamond Flash said as she brushed her spikey mane out of her eyes. "I should probably go. Let you two talk."

"But..."

"Trust me. I'm the last pony Dash ever wants to see."

Twilight Sparkle watched her go away and looked up at the water tower. She teleported to the top and appeared next to the sour looking Rainbow Dash. Three apple cores lay besides her. The cyan pegasus didn't even start out of her funk as she sulked. "Little much all at once?"

"Little much," Rainbow Dash muttered as she kicked an apple core negligently off. "So how'd you find me?"

"Um... a little bird?"

"Tsh..." Rainbow Dash closed her eyes as she turned away. "It was Flash, wasn't it?"

"She was worried about you," Twilight Sparkle said as she waved her hoof towards Ponyville.

"No. You were worried about me. She just did what she always does; be perfect." Rainbow Dash said glumly. "I wish I didn't even have a family sometimes, you know?"

"Rainbow Dash!" Twilight said, but then spotted Rainbow Dash's miserable look, "This is a lot more than your parents, isn't it?"

Rainbow Dash sighed and leaned back to look at the stars. "You know the best day of my life? Going to Summer Flight School alone. Flash said she didn't want to go, so for the first time ever I was my own person. And you know what? It was awesome. I was a natural flyer. I could be cocky and no one would see my siblings and snicker. I met Fluttershy and..." she stopped and let out a long groan, "Fluttershy..."

"What?"

"I just realized why I hated seeing her getting teased. It was exactly the kind of teasing I always faced in Fillygo." She tossed out the second core off the edge. "Now I'm just angry. Angry at mom and dad for being here. Angry at Fluttershy for showing them where I was running to. Angry

at my sisters for crowding me out, even here in Ponyville.” She covered her face with her hooves, “I’m never going to win the try outs.”

“Oh come on, Rainbow. I know you’re upset but...,” she paused as she saw the serious look in her friend’s eyes.

“You’re not a competitor, Twilight. If you’re going to win you got to be in ‘the zone’. It’s more than being fit and in shape. It’s focus. It’s seeing every move you have to make to win.” She said as she flicked the third apple core away. “Right now I’m so out of the zone that Fluttershy could probably beat me.”

Twilight sighed as she stood on the roof of the tower. “Well I may not be a competitor or a sister, but I’m pretty sure that you’re not going to get back in the zone hiding out here and feeling sorry for yourself.” She put a hoof on Rainbow Dash’s shoulder. “I’m sure that if you really focus on what you’re feeling, you’ll be back in the zone in ten seconds flat. That’s what Rainbow Dash is capable of. See you tomorrow,” she said with a friendly smile before she closed her eyes and teleported away in a flash of magic.

Rainbow Dash sighed as she looked at the rising moon and closed her eyes. “Ten... nine... eight...” she counted, trying to lock up her resentment to get through tomorrow. “Three... two... one...” She opened her eyes, looking up at the stars before she grunted and thumped the back of her head against the tower, “Nuts...”

The knock on Fluttershy’s door was quite out of place for this time of night, and she opened it a crack with candle in her mouth. When it illuminated Rainbow Dash she hesitated, then pulled it open and set the candle down on a table. “Sorry,” she said at once.

“Don’t tell me you’re sorry, Fluttershy. I want to know why you helped my parents find me. Why you threw that party knowing I didn’t want to be there,” Rainbow Dash answered, trying to keep firm as she saw just how unhappy Fluttershy was about this.

“I...” she started but then closed her mouth. Rainbow Dash wanted to throttle her, more than any other pony. She was her friend. She could see Pinkie Pie trying this, but coming from Fluttershy the whole thing was intolerable. “Family’s important...”

“If you want to be around your family, then be around them. Don’t meddle in mine...” Rainbow Dash began, wanting desperately to chew some pony out. Unfortunately then Fluttershy started to cry silently and Rainbow Dash wanted to tear her mane out. “What? What is it?”

Fluttershy just looked at her a moment, “I... I can’t.”

“You... can’t...? Can’t what?”

Fluttershy turned away from her and walked to a desk. She opened a drawer and carefully took out a stack of photographs. Two ponies stood firmly on either side of a Fluttershy a little younger than when they'd first met at Summer Flight School. The stallion that could only have been Fluttershy's father stood regally on her left and on Fluttershy's right was a beautiful mare with long pink hair. What was most fascinating was that the young Fluttershy seemed so excited with her ear to ear grin that her mother was actually holding her still.

"What's this?" Rainbow asked, but Fluttershy didn't say a word. The next picture had Fluttershy staring in almost shock with her father standing beside her, his lips a firm line. After that Fluttershy seemed to shrink before her eyes even as she grew older in each photo, her mane growing long to hide her from view. Her father only seemed to grow harder with each year until he stared at the camera with undisguised anger. Finally Rainbow Dash recognized her father. "Wait, this is Radiant. Fluttershy, your father's the head Pegasus of Cloudsdale?"

Fluttershy didn't say a word. She only nodded once.

"But, your mother. What happened..." Rainbow Dash began as she looked back at the first. There were smiles and joy that were on each of their faces in that first photograph. It didn't matter what happened. She wasn't in any of the other pictures. "Fluttershy..."

The yellow Pegasus gave a soft sniff. "Family is important," was all she could say before she drew a shaky breath and rubbed her nose, "I wanted... I just wanted..."

Rainbow Dash set the pictures down, the tiny Fluttershy waving enthusiastically at the camera. She put her hooves around Fluttershy's neck and hugged her tight, getting a hug in return. "Shhh... It's all right, Fluttershy. I know you meant well," and after seeing that, she had to admit a good deal of her anger had left her.

When Rainbow Dash left Fluttershy returned to the desk. Her hoof carefully lifted the last picture in the desk. Her friends, all in ruined Gala dresses, posing for a final picture of the night. With Spike on the left raising a mug of cocoa in salute, Princess Celestia on the right, Rainbow Dash's hoof across Fluttershy's shoulders with that ever confident grin and Fluttershy smiling despite the horrid night, she couldn't help but smile and touch her own image; an image of a ghost of a filly that might have been.

Misty Falls, the highest waterfall in Equestria, roared over its cliff in a spectacular crescent that sent up a perpetual mist from the rocks below. All around the falls the course had been laid out in rings of clouds kept in

place by the qualifying team. At the top of the falls, dozens of ponies assembled themselves in bleachers to cheer for their friends. Rainshadow and Lightdancer and all her sisters sat with Twilight Sparkle and her friends. Applejack and Pinkie Pie unpacked their treats while Rarity unfurled a banner cheering on Rainbow Dash and passing out little flags with Dash's rainbow cutie mark sewn on it.

"How are you feeling? In the zone yet?" Twilight Sparkle asked Rainbow Dash looked at the course laid out.

"Not yet, but this is as close as I'm going to get," she glanced behind her at her family, "I think it was easier performing in front of the Wonderbolts."

"You'll be fine. Just go out there and do what you do best!" Twilight Sparkle tried to pass as much confidence as she could in her smile.

"Yeah, but what if my best isn't good enough?" Dash muttered as she took her place in line. Each pony would get three trials. Best time of all the trials would get the formal try out positions. Dash had practiced this course for months outside her house; it had one killer hairpin turn that she'd have to power through or it'd would kill her time.

Suddenly it was Dash's turn. She gave one glance at her family and friends waving their flags, closed her eyes, crouched, and clawed her way into the zone. The kick signaling her start sent her like lightning into the course. Each turn was accompanied by a powerful snap of her wings as she powered around each turn. Her fear melted away as the simple thrill of racing focused her thoughts into the action of flying like mad.

She approached the hairpin turn, her wings beating furiously. From above she barely made out Diamond Flash yelling something, but by then she was in the turn, wings powering her as quickly as possible. On the practice course she'd shoot past the ring, turn as tightly as possible, and reverse to punch through.

Her practice course didn't have a waterfall. Rainbow Dash slammed through the rising mist and falling water and bounced right off the stone wall. For several seconds she tumbled uselessly, stunned, before shaking off the impact enough to recover. Her time for her first run was completely shot, however.

Landing back at the top she tried her best not to shake. The impact would leave some interesting bruises in the morning. As her family crowded around her in concern, Dash found it in her to smile and wave a wing. "Ah, just a little slip up. I'm fine."

"Dash, about that turn, if you-" Diamond Flash began quickly before Rainbow cut her off.

"I said I'm fine! Just took me by surprise is all. I'll power through it like it's nothing this time."

"But..." Diamond Flash began just as Rainbow Dash took her place back in the queue.

"I don't need her help. I'm the best flyer in Equestria. I know it," Rainbow Dash almost convinced herself. Every other pony slowed way down to make the turn, but she knew she could do it. She just had to do it faster.

The approach on the hair pin had her launching at the waterfall and as soon as she was through the cloud ring her body turned ninety degrees and flapped her wings so fast she thought they were going to tear right off. She started to make the turn when she crashed into the rising mist and had to kick off the stone beneath. When she finished the second run her wings ached and she gasped for breath. Her time was good, but not the best. Not by three seconds. "Darn it! Why can't I do this?"

"Dash!" shouted the one pony she did not want to talk to right now. She folded her ears and started back towards the queue. "Dash, will you knock it off and talk to me?"

"About what? How I'm messing up?" Rainbow Dash snapped as she whirled on her twin, "If you know so much about flying why don't you do my third trial for me? You'd probably nail it too. Perfect as always."

"I don't care about flying a race, Dash." Diamond Flash said as she pointed down at the hairpin. "I just want to help you!"

"I don't need your help!" Rainbow Dash shouted back at her.

Diamond Flash looked hurt as she backed away. "Rainbow Dash, please..."

Rainbow Dash turned away from her and then paused. Diamond Flash was just trying to look good. Prove how much better she was at everything. She didn't need her.

Family is important...

Just need to focus and... not think about a photograph of two Pegasus being miserable together.

"Ten seconds," Rainbow Dash said softly.

Diamond Flash blinked, "What?"

"You got ten seconds. What do I need to do?"

Diamond nodded and pointed down at the face of the waterfall. "You're trying to fly straight at the second ring at full power. The angle is too sharp and it's putting you in the wall. Fly away from the turn instead."

"That'll take me off course and into the wall anyway. How is that better?"

“Dash, the mist coming up the falls. It’s just like a cloud! Remember?” She said as she gestured along the curve of the falls. “When we were kids?”

Dash stared down at the falls and her eyes went wide. “My sister is a genius!” She gasped, grinning widely.

“You can do this, Rainbow. No pony can fly like you.” Diamond Dash said with a nod as she backed away. “Now really show them how it’s done.”

When Dash took her place, she felt calm. Sure. This was the zone. She could see every turn in the course laid out one after the next. She saw her sister’s plan like flipping through a stack of photographs.

When she hit the start of the hairpin, she didn’t try and cut in tightly or slow down. She went out till she felt the wet kiss of the rising waterfall mist pushing against her hooves and belly. Her wings pumped furiously, accelerating her along the face of the waterfall as she skimmed mere inches above the wet rocks. Suddenly the turn completed and she launched through the second ring with blinding speed. She finished the rest of the course like a blue blur.

She crossed the finish line not just with the best time of the day, but the best time she’d ever run on this course even with her practice. Instantly her family and friends swarmed her, and her many colorful sisters picked her up with a cheer. They tossed her in the air, catching her with their wings, till Dash cheated and started flying. Incensed at her breaking the rules her sisters piled on her, laughing. Pinkie Pie, not one to let family get in the way of fun, jumped in as well.

Finally she disentangled herself and ran to her friends, “Oh my gosh, did you see that? I mean I know you saw but did you see that? Those rocks were like right there and I was like, oh no, but I stuck in the zone and...” She seemed in a complete daze of accomplishment. “I can’t believe I won that.”

“I can,” Diamond Flash replied with her sure little smile. “Rainbow Dash can win anything. She might occasionally need a little advice though.”

Dash smiled and brushed her mane down, “Yeah well, occasionally she needs a little reminder to listen to her family, no matter how ticked off she might be at them.” She looked over at Fluttershy and the yellow Pegasus flushed. She trotted over to her, looking into her eyes, “You know... I’m probably at the legal limit with nine, but if you want you can be my sister anytime, Fluttershy.”

Fluttershy smiled broadly and then lurched forward to hug Rainbow Dash. She sniffed softly, hiding her face in Rainbow's striped mane before she composed herself. Then she straightened and looked at her sister. "Come on, Flash! Let me show you some other moves I've been working on. You and Fluttershy can tell me how to improve them even more." With a laugh the three Pegasi took to the skies together.

* * *

That night, after Pinkie Pie's celebration for Dash sticking the preliminary try out, Twilight Sparkle started to write her letter. "Dear Princess Celestia..." but the pen stopped in front of her, floating in her magical grip. Then she frowned softly as she thought a moment. The paper was wadded up and a new sheet floated in front of her. *Dear mom and dad... How have you been? I know it's been a long time since we've seen each other or I've written. My friends reminded me today that family is an important part of who we are. I wanted to let you know that I wouldn't be the pony I am today without both of you caring for me. Thank you. I love you and hope I see you soon.*

Your loving daughter, Twilight Sparkle.