“Alright, everypony!” shouted the tattooed announcer, tipping his top-hat towards the six ponies now standing beside him on the stage. “The judges have made their private deliberations, and we’re just about to reveal the winner of this year’s *Baltimare Tattoo Showdown*!!~”

The audience roared in applause from all around. Troy was back in the crowd to stand beside Flamingo’s artist friends, not looking uncomfortable about being among tattooed ponies in the slightest. In fact, he was feeling content with himself while wearing his skull tank top and holding a shopping bag full of tattooing books that he purchased from one of the stands. Even though the contents inside were meant for his husband, the gryphon hoped that Canvas would appreciate the gesture.

While Canvas was standing at the front of the stage, trying his hardest not to appear too overwhelmed in the middle of the line of white-furred ponies, Flamingo Fire was among the row of artists standing in wait near the back. All of the tattoo artists looked disheveled following their brutal six hour marathons, save for their freshly-pressed outfits. Flamingo was smiling nervously while wearing a short black dress, being the only mare among the five stallions in the competition. Despite her wariness, the mare couldn’t have felt more sure of herself while smiling over at her new friend.

“Now before we announce the winning design, let’s take a moment to appreciate every piece that’s up here today. All of these ponies have just been put through the ringer to get these

custom-made pieces of art, and we couldn't be happier about the hard work that each artist gave for us tonight!"

The crowds cheered wholeheartedly, and Troy gave a couple hard pumps of his claw while hooting loudly. Flamingo blushed and beamed in pride alongside the other artists. Canvas had to breathe slowly to calm himself as he felt so many eyes on him and his new tattoo. It took considerable effort for him to try and not appear too scared while the flashes of multiple cameras went off continuously across the audience.

"So with that being said…" The announcer brought his cane up to point at the scoreboard, revealing the large drop-down display that was unrolling beneath it. An unseen projector hit the screen with crystal-clear clarity, ready to show off the close-up displays to the crowds. "Here's one last run-through of the designs from this year, starting with tattoo number one!"

The large projector showed a high-definition photo of the first pony's tattoo over her left shoulder. The pony in question smiled from the praise, but didn't try to hide the portrait of a determined-looking gryphoness that was beautifully rendered across her white fur in various shades of black and grey. The gryphoness in the tattoo was staring outward with an intimidating scowl, wearing a wonderfully-detailed headdress made from a lion's head. The taxidermy angle may have been a bit taboo for most ponies to process, but the audience's cheering applause made it clear that they loved the talented artistry nonetheless. Even Canvas had to shrug with an

impressed nod, mentally noting how quickly such a piece would've sold at his studio for the right price.

"And here's tattoo number two!"

The slideshow projected the next entry. This tattoo was etched down a stallion's hind-leg, portraying a grim reaper ripping through the skin and coming out with its scythe in its bony claw. Canvas was downright impressed by how realistically the artist emulated the effect of torn flesh over the pony's fur, which gave the design much more depth than expected. It was another black and grey piece like the first, but the applause that it received was strong enough to make the stallion look away bashfully.

"Excellent work! Now for tattoo number three!"

The next one was done over a foreleg like Canvas', only this was a detailed etching of a bonefish scrawled with a tribal-like motif. Canvas may still have been a novice when it came to tattooing, but he could tell from the design's grainy texture and precise cornering that it was likely done with a stick-and-poke instead of a machine. Even though such an idea might've been risky for a competition like this, he couldn't argue with how masterfully done it looked on the stallion beside him.

"And for tattoo number four, we have…"

Canvas' tattoo was then shown across the projector screen, eliciting a strong round of applause like the previous three. Canvas smiled pridefully while all the attention was focused on his piece, which looked spectacular in the photo. He could hear Troy and the tattoo artists beside him all cheering wildly, which caused Canvas to giggle nervously. Though it was still fresh and slightly red around the sides, the rose and wrap-around vine of thorns looked amazing around the stallion's teal hoof. And given how it was only one of two color pieces out of the six, the fact that its colors stood out so prominently over non-white fur was nothing short of impressive to every pony.

"Amazing work! Just like tattoo number five!"

The slideshow revealed the fifth tattoo entry, which was the only other colored piece. The tattoo was a stunning portrait piece of a photorealistic lion, its muzzle open wide to show off its glistening fangs for a silent roar. It's gold and brown fur stood out beautifully against the back of the stallion's shoulder, as did the bright pink shutter-shades that were nestled over the lion's snout. Underneath the wild and colorful portrait, there was a bright purple text in a bold font that read 'PARTY ANIMAL', most likely a detail insisted by the wearer himself as judged by his content smile.

"And last, but not least… here's tattoo number six!"

When the last photo popped up on the screen, Canvas gulped nervously while the crowd applauded loudly. The final tattoo was a black and grey portrait of a crying clown, which carried an obscenely photorealistic amount of detail against the mare's shoulder. For all his confidence, Canvas couldn't ignore how astounding the portrait looked with its high-contrast shading and perfect proportions. Even the large tear streaming down the clown's cheek included a thin trail that was caught by the light's sheen, and showed the slightest hint of makeup being undone. Canvas was unsure if he could pull off an effect that impressive on a canvas board within six hours.

After the applause finally finished, the projector screen slowly rolled back up while the announcer spoke down below. "Okay, everypony! As you can all see, the judges had a lot of deliberation over which designs were the best. But without further ado, let's start the rankings from sixth place to first!"

Amidst the audience's excited cheering, Troy's eyes widened with worry. He glanced over at Marzo, who merely shrugged. "Yeah, I know how that sounds. But don't worry, even the last-place finishers are usually okay with what they have."

"Well, duh," noted High Flier."It's kinda hard to get pissed when you get a free tattoo."

Cherry Bomb gave an apprehensive nod in agreement, but couldn't say anything before the announcer continued. "In sixth place, we have tattoo number…"

A magical aura not belonging to the announcer floated a small stack of cards towards him. He picked up the first preassigned card, nodding before shouting into the microphone. "... FIVE!"

There were some strong groans from the audience, but none were as loud as the one from the pony beside Canvas. The artist felt shocked that such a well-applied tattoo received the bottom placement. Out in the audience, Marzo leaned in close to Troy and whispered. "That's not too surprising. Adding text to an artistic design is fairly frowned upon in these contests."

Troy felt equally as surprised about that piece losing, but he could only shrug while watching the losing ponies exit the stage. As the sixth placed ponies dispersed, the announcer continued on with his countdown. "Yes, I know. That *was* a wonderful design. Now then! At fifth place, we have tattoo number… THREE!"

Canvas cringed from hearing the disappointed groan of the pony on his other side. He may have been grateful that his tattoo wasn't out of the game just yet, but his heart was still thundering over how high his friend's design could get. Of course, he could only imagine how Flamingo Fire was feeling as she stood with a fidget among four suited stallions. The fifth place ponies exited the stage peacefully.

"In our coveted fourth place. The design goes to tattoo number… TWO!"

That elicited some surprised responses from the artists in front, but the group still cheered their friend on for staying higher in the leaderboards. Canvas and Flamingo glanced over at each other briefly, smiling as giddily as they could through their nervous winces. By that point, only six ponies were present on the stage: the three ponies with tattoos, and the three antsy artists.

“Our third place finisher of the Baltimare Tattoo Showdown, and winner of one thousand bits goes to… tattoo number ONE!”

The mare sporting the gryphoness tattoo sighed with her eyes closed, but still smiled contently. As she exited the line, she gave a hoof-bump to the burly stallion who exited the artist’ line. The announcer floated out a large check with his magic, and allowed the duo to take some photos while the audience applauded their efforts.

“And now! The moment we’ve all been waiting for! We only have two tattoos left, but just one will win the ten thousand bit check! So without further ado…”

The announcer motioned for the two remaining ponies to come forward on stage. Canvas breathed out with a shudder, not even trying to look back at the mare sporting the clown tattoo. He could only guess which design would appeal more to the judges. Meanwhile back at the artist line, Flamingo Fire was squirming badly enough to stain her teeth from how badly she was biting her lipstick.

“The winner of the Tenth Annual Baltimare Tattoo Showdown belongs to…

“...

“... Tattoo Number FOUR!!!”

Canvas gasped in shock, and practically leapt out of his skin as he shrieked out in joy. “OH MY GOSH!!” The audience was roaring in applause, and Troy was shouting out in excited glee for his husband. And while the announcer continued on to give his sympathies for pony number six, Canvas turned his attention back to the mare shrieking on stage with him. *“OH MY GOSH!!!”*

“I WON!!!” Flamingo Fire was jumping up and down in unbridled glee, the fringe of her dress waving about wildly. She laughed hysterically as she lunged into Canvas’ hooves, being careful not to touch the tattoo with her hug. “Oh my gosh, Canvas we WON!! WE ACTUALLY WON!!”

“No, *you* won!” assured Canvas with a tearful smile, hugging her back as best as he could with one hoof. As the mare’s elated laughter began to subside, it didn’t take long for Canvas to hear them turn to choked-up sobs. Flamingo couldn’t keep the tears from streaming down her face and ruining her mascara, but she was still smiling wholeheartedly. “Th… Thank you… Thank you so much, Canvas…”

Canvas felt a few tears of his own building up. “It’s no problem, Flamingo. I’d do it for any friend.”

Canvas and Flamingo didn’t pay much heed to the cheering audience, or even to the announcer while sharing such a caring hug on stage. However, the two did take notice of the round of shocked gasps that broke across the convention center in an instant. The moment they pulled away from their hug, Flamingo jolted with a gasp of her own while pointing at Canvas. “Holy crap! Canvas, it’s your Cutie Mark!”

Canvas let out an excited gasp while the audience grew rowdier by the second, and he lept around to catch a glimpse of his glowing flank. Much like back in Sugar Cube Corner, Canvas could feel the tiny pulsations in his nerves each time that unexplainable glow emanated from around his Cutie Mark. Everyone in the convention center was either gawking or shouting in response to seeing the phenomena up close, many of them not even aware that a pony on their Friendship Mission came to Baltimare in the first place. However, despite how excited Flamingo Fire may have been for her friend’s success, Canvas’ look of satisfied elation quickly turned to a panicked wince when he saw the cameras flashing wildly.

“Ohnogosh, congratulations!” said Flamingo with a huge grin. “Canvas, you gotta--”

Before she could finish, Canvas instantly rushed off the stage, much to the surprised gasps of many of the attendees. Flamingo ran after him, only to see the stallion hop behind the curtains

with his Cutie Mark still glowing. Fortunately, Canvas popped his head out from the curtain's opening to smile back. "Listen, I know this is a big deal, but I already stole the spotlight from you back in Canterlot! This is your moment, girl! Get back out there and celebrate your achievement!"

Only a moment passed before Flamingo saw the flashing cameras being redirected back towards herself. The mare looked unsure about accepting the glory for herself, not wanting to overstep Canvas' success for her own selfish win. But when she saw Canvas nodding with a warm smile and a prideful wink, it didn't take long for Flamingo to respond in turn with a smirk of her own. "Well… we're still having a party at my shop tonight to celebrate!"

"Sounds good!"

Canvas and Flamingo shared one last hug before the stallion disappeared backstage. And while Flamingo Fire went back out to jumping for joy on the stage, savoring the immense applause and praise she was receiving from the crowds below, Canvas was giggling with pride as he danced by himself with his Cutie Mark brightly lit.

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The Next Day

It was just about midday when Troy and Canvas' train finally arrived back in Canterlot. After the eventful day both of them had back in Baltimare, the couple were more than happy to reconnect during Flamingo Fire's afterparty. Troy may have been brand-new to the culture his husband had just accustomed himself to, but he couldn't have been more proud of the accomplishments Canvas made since the previous day. Not only did the stallion manage to solve his friendship problem with flying colors by himself, but he also ended up with a talented new friend in the process.

Upon arrival, Canvas took a moment to marvel at the polaroid he was holding. It was a photograph he took just before leaving the Baltimare station with Troy, with himself and Flamingo Fire nestled close together for an impromptu selfie shot. Both of the ponies looked blissful while holding each other close, smiling at the newly-formed friendship they discovered. Canvas was already planning to meet up with Flamingo Fire as soon as possible, and couldn't have looked happier while slipping the photograph back in his art bag.

When the couple arrived at Canterlot Castle, Canvas was instantly granted access due to his visit the other day. Of course, as he and Troy trotted down the spacious marble halls side-by-side, Canvas blushed quite a bit as he felt so many different eyes on him. He knew that he would likely be the center of attention upon returning due to just completing his Cutie Mission for Princess Twilight; but Canvas didn't need to ask why so many of the Guards or castle staff were gawking at him wide-eyed as they passed. His foreleg was still shimmering with a thick layer of

clear gel he reapplied back at the station, which allowed his new tattoo to stand out prominently against his fur like a badge of pride.

“So, Troy… You don’t think your family is going to, like… *disown* me for getting this, do you?”

Troy scoffed with a playful smirk. “Dude, come on! Your tattoo literally solved a Friendship Mission for Princess Twilight! Mom and Dad might be sticklers about a lot of things, but they’re not that dense! I’m pretty sure they’ll understand enough to see your work as an exception.”

“Yeah, I hope so…” Canvas nodded affirmatively, but he still looked wary at best. “I mean… I know I shouldn’t be that worried, since I already changed their minds about a lot of things.”

“Exactly! Seriously, if they’re able to adjust to me being married to a stallion, they’ll be cool with me being married to a *tattooed* stallion~”

Canvas giggled nervously, unable to refute it by any means. “Yeah, that’s true. I just hope they’ll be okay with me getting more…”

Troy was already aware of Canvas’ plans of exploring the craft further, and most likely receiving more tattoos to cover the rest of his forelegs. The mental image was definitely something to get used to, but the gryphon still smirked with intrigue while looking down at his husband in

approval. “Well, you already got one. If anything, leaving it only at that is gonna make your forelegs look *bare*.”

Canvas was now smiling more naturally. “Troy, you have no idea how happy I am to hear that from you~”

Troy smiled right back, and the couple stopped in the middle of the hall to lean in for a kiss. The couple may have been fortunate enough to share the previous evening together in a hotel room, but that wasn’t enough to keep the two from remaining affectionate in Canterlot Castle. However, both of their ears perked up when they overheard the very distinct woofs of a large dog echoing down the halls. *“WOOF! WOOF, WOOF!!”*

A considerable distance away from the married couple, Princess Twilight Sparkle and Spike were all smiles while enjoying their first summoning with the newly-inducted Council of Friendship. The Mane Six were left by themselves as they trotted down the hallway in tandem, laughing contentedly without any interruptions from the Castle Guards. Since ‘Twilight having some much-needed time with her friends’ was literally the first law she passed as Ruler of Equestria, everypony staffed at Canterlot Castle knew better than to bother her with anything that wasn’t an emergency. And even with the most recent Friendship Mission being solved by Canvas Clawston, Twilight seemed more focused on regrouping with her friends while Tenor was barking happily alongside them.

“GAH!!” The moment Rainbow Dash rested her wings and landed back on the ground, the Saint Bernard instantly lunged in to give the pegasus several sloppy licks of his giant tongue. The Wonderbolt’s grossed-out grimace elicited quite a bit of laughter from the others, including Fluttershy who was trying to hold onto Tenor’s leash. She wasn’t used to lugging animals this big around Canterlot Castle, but Fluttershy was happy to bring Tenor along after receiving the request from Twilight. Rainbow tried not to gag while wiping the slobber from her face. “Geeze, Tenor! I know you haven’t seen us in a while, but you don’t have to *drown* us in your drool!”

“Oh, he’s just a little excited,” cooed Fluttershy, scratching Tenor behind one of his big floppy ears. Tenor panted happily, sitting firmly in place to receive the pegasus’ pets. “As soon as he found out his owners were coming back from Baltimare, he’s been really anxious about seeing them again!”

“Oh yeah!” Applejack, who was the only Element to have seen Canvas before his summoning, perked up her brows curiously while staring back at Twilight. “Sugar Belle told me about Canvas’ Cutie Mark lightin’ up back at Sugar Cube Corner the other day. Did he really solve his Friendship Problem already?”

“As a matter of fact, he did!” Twilight was beaming proudly while she used her horn to conjure out the parchment with a flash of her magic. Spike was hovering right beside her with his flapping wings, leaning in to double-check the details she was reading out loud. “Just before seven pm last night, the Cutie Map reactivated to indicate that Canvas’ mission had been

successfully completed! I have no idea where he went while in Baltimare, or what he had to do to solve the problem. However, he and his husband are set to arrive at any moment to relay their findings."

"OOH! Troy's here too?!" Pinkie Pie, who was constantly hopping around the group with cartoonish "boings" in her steps, was already grinning like a madpony. "Well if that's the case, we should get the kitchen staff to prepare some meat! I bet he'd like some fried chicken to celebrate his husband kicking Cutie Mark patootie!"

Tenor let out several excited barks while straining against his leash, clearly pent-up after hearing the words "fried chicken." Rarity tried not to wince from Tenor's excitable stance, but refrained from appearing too judgemental. "Fluttershy, you said it was alright for dogs like Tenor to consume meat products, correct?" she asked with a strong hint of concern in her tone.

Fortunately, Fluttershy was quick to nod. "Oh, absolutely! In fact, most of the dog food I purchase for my sanctuary contains animal protein for--*HUUUHHHH*!!!"

Fluttershy's profound gasp of shock was soon accompanied by similar responses from everyone else in their group. Even Tenor's ears perked up when he saw Troy and Canvas at the end of the hallway, their presence eliciting some stunned stares from the Elements and Spike. Even though the couple were a considerable distance from them, it was obvious their bulging eyes took notice

of Canvas' foreleg. Meanwhile, Canvas had to stop with an embarrassed blush, trying his hardest not to hide the rose tattoo that was pridefully adorned to his left hoof.

"Uhhh… Heh heh heh…" Canvas looked away from the group sheepishly, and addressed Troy. "I guess I don't need to ask if they noticed it--OOMF!!"

The very moment Canvas looked away, Tenor took advantage of the perfect opportunity to pounce on top of him and start licking his face. The stallion had to keep his tattooed hoof out of reach due to it still healing, but his grossed-out smile remained as he writhed from the Saint Bernard's affectionate greeting. Meanwhile, Troy and everyone else couldn't help laughing while the stallion was pinned to the floor.

"Oh, *man*..." As soon as he saw Canvas' new body art, Spike groaned in disappointment while crossing his arms against his chest in midair. "How come he got a tattoo on his Friendship Mission and I didn't?"

The End