

The Mane Event

Part Four

The six chariots kept in a close formation of two rows of three during the ride, allowing the ponies to talk amongst themselves during the trip. The first row consisted of Pinkie Pie and Blues with Applejack and Big Macintosh in the middle and Ditzzy Doo, Dinky and Fluttershy on the far left. Behind them was the chariot filled with carts, Rarity and more apples in the middle, and Twilight, Trixie, Spike and Angel on the far right. Rainbow Dash took it upon herself to be messenger-pony, in case conversation took place between the rows.

"This sure is exciting, mama!" Dinky said, standing between the two pegasus ponies, "I've never been so high up before."

"It can get really scary up even higher." Fluttershy said, "Cloudsdale is so high up, most days you can't even see the ground."

"Wow!"

"Isn't this fun, Blues?" Pinkie asked. "Look, you can see so much from way up high like this."

"Yeah...sure is." Blues said, gulping. He was having a hard time not imagining the chariot breaking away from its drivers and smashing into kindling on the ground far below.

"Oh you don't need to be so nervous." Pinkie replied, noticing his shaking hooves, "These things hardly ever crash. I think."

"Heh, that's not very encouraging." He said to his date with a timid smile.

"I'm so glad we all found somepony special to bring with us!" Pinkie said, changing off of a topic Blues obviously found uncomfortable. "I've got Blues, Twilight found Trixie, Fluttershy's bringing Angel, Rainbow Dash and Rarity are meeting somepony at the Gala, and Applejack, your special someone is Big Macintosh?"

"That's right, Pinkie." Applejack said, "ain't nopony more special than my big brother here. Why, he's gonna help me sell more apples than ever before. I can't wait to see those fancy-shmancy ponies go crazy over our apples."

"So, you only brought him to help with the apple sales?" Fluttershy chimed in.

"Of course. Y'all weren't thinkin' me and him were...intimate, were ya?"

"Oh no, no." They all said quickly, afraid to admit that was just what they were thinking.

"What are they talking about, mommy?" Dinky asked, tugging on the end of Ditzzy's dress to gain her

attention.

“Not for little fillies to know that yet.” Ditzzy said kindly to her child. “I’ll tell you later, dear.”

In the back row, the conversation was taking a rather different direction.

“So Twilight, dear,” Rarity began, raising her voice slightly so it could be heard one chariot over, “I was wondering if you could clear something up for me.”

“Of course, Rarity. What is it?”

“I didn’t want to say anything with that crowd watching back in Ponyville, but I was just wondering if you could tell me *why* exactly you’re wearing that awful old dress, after I made you a stunning new dress for the Gala.”

“Well, Rarity, I just-“

“And if you could tell me *why*” She continued, narrowing her eyes to display her growing anger, “that marvelous, hand-crafted dress is being worn by Trixie, whom I specifically said would *not* be wearing one of my dresses to the Gala.”

“Rarity, I just wanted-“

“Really, I don’t know why you couldn’t just acquiesce to my wishes just this once.”

“Rarity!” Twilight yelled, silencing even the ponies in the front row of chariots. “Your wishes were mean-spirited. You’re still upset about something Trixie did months ago, even though all she wants right now is your forgiveness. I’m trying to show her that ponies in Ponyville are kind, caring, good ponies who are willing to overlook another’s flaws in the name of friendship. You’re not making that any easier for me right now.”

Rarity stopped and stared at Twilight. She had been full of, at least in her mind, righteous indignation just a moment ago. But the purple unicorn’s words gave her pause. Was she really being too hard on Trixie? Should she have given in and decided to be best friends right away? No, Rarity decided, she shouldn’t have to make nice with another pony just because Twilight said so. Her whole life’s work, her one true purpose here on Equestria had been insulted by Trixie. Rarity admitted that maybe she’d been too harsh on Trixie when she did seem penitent, but she shouldn’t just pretend nothing happened.

While Rarity was debating with herself internally, trying to come up with some rebuttal, the ponies in the front row were trying to determine what had just happened

“What’d she say?” Blues asked Big Macintosh, feeling a bit more comfortable talking with another stallion while surrounded by mares.

“I’m not sure.” The red pony responded. “Did you hear anything, Rainbow Dash?”

“I caught a bit of it.” She said, flying in lock step with the chariots, keeping just over Applejack’s head. “Apparently Rarity’s mad that Twilight gave Trixie her special dress. Twilight told Rarity she’s just trying to

show Trixie how nice Ponyville ponies can be, but Rarity won't let her grudge against Trixie go."

"Well that's silly." Pinkie Pie chimed in, "All ponies deserve a second chance. We can't all be perfect all the time."

"I think you are." Blues said, mostly out of honest respect for Pinkie, and perhaps just a tiny bit out of wanting to win brownie points with his date.

"Aww, that's so sweet, but nopony's perfect." She said, "Even I tend to be too suspicious of my friends sometimes."

"Hmm...too quick to forgive or too slow. Which is worse?" Ditzzy Doo asked from the far left chariot. "One may make ponies too trusting, one may make ponies too lonely."

"Well, everyone can change, right?" Fluttershy added, "Maybe we should just see what Trixie does from now on."

"Enough about all that, look up ahead!" Rainbow Dash cried, pointing the way with her hoof.

The ponies all turned their eyes with anticipation and saw the great capitol city of Equestria: Canterlot, break through the clouds in front of them. On a clear day, one could just barely make out the skyline from Ponyville, but the proximity to the city along with the cloudiness of the morning made it an awe inspiring sight. The whole city was built right into the side of a mountain. Great spires jutted out from the rock face, and multiple waterfalls fell from great heights to the valley far below.

Carrying their heavy loads, the chariot continued their slow flight through the town. Down below, a multitude of ponies turned to look at the procession as it flew over the rooftops. The guard ponies gave little notice to the ones on the ground. They continued toward the great castle, as they had been instructed. They flew right past many banners and flags, the entire town was apparently preparing for the Grand Galloping Gala.

The chariots' passengers took in the sights of a city on the precipice of celebration. They could feel the excitement in the air, and Pinkie was even pointing out some attractions that she simply had to attend that day. Twilight Sparkle mentioned to Trixie some places she remembered from her time living in Canterlot, and the other ponies were simply marveling at how busy the whole place looked. This feeling of wonderment at the city continued until the ponies realized they were not stopping in the city itself, but had been flown into the royal castle. The chariots landed just outside two large wooden doors draped in red cloth and displaying large, round golden handles.

The royal guards tried to stand as calm and stoic as ever, but a few of the less strong members were breathing heavily from the long trip. Especially worn out were the two guards tasked with flying two carts full of apples and apple accessories. Some of the other guards gave them sympathetic looks as the entire party dismounted, each thanking the guards for the safe trip.

Twilight Sparkle, most familiar with the princess and the customs of royalty in general, went straight to the impressive doors and pulled back an incredibly ornate knocker with her magic. She told Applejack to move the carts out of sight, and then gave the door three strong raps.

“Enter.” Came a voice from inside.

Twilight pushed the door open with her snout and the group entered the cavernous main hall of the castle. A long red carpet created a path from the door straight to two great thrones. On the left was a tall golden throne, decorated with inlaid gems and carvings representing the history of ponykind. On this throne sat Princess Celestia, raiser of the sun and ruler of Equestria. To her left stood a slightly shorter throne made of silver. It was also covered in gems and engravings, but to a lesser extent than the golden one. Sitting on a plush red cushion on this throne was Luna, Celestia’s younger sister and controller of the moon and nighttime.

The group approached cautiously, afraid of doing something to upset this impressive duo, until Celestia said, “Twilight, no need for your friends to be so timid. Come over here. Luna and I are very excited to meet each of your choices.”

The eleven ponies, one rabbit, and one dragon presented themselves in front of the thrones.

“Hiya princesses!” Pinkie Pie said, being the first to speak up. “I’m Pinkie Pie!”

“Haha, yes we both know, Pinkie Pie.” Luna said, smiling at her innocence. “I think my sister and I are very familiar with you and your five good friends. However, there are some faces I am not familiar with here. Whom did you bring with you?”

“This is Blues.” Pinkie said as he walked up next to her in front of the rest of the group. “We met during Winter Wrap up and both really enjoy skating and hot chocolate.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Blues.” Celestia said. “I hope you enjoy the Gala.”

“I’m sure I will, princess.” He replied.

“Ah’m Applejack, yer majesties.” The tan earth pony said, “And this is my brother Big Macintosh.”

“Oh, I see.” Celestia said with a bit of surprise. “Well, I’m glad you two are not embarrassed about who you are.”

“Your fetlocks are...unshorn.” Luna said, practically staring at the stallion’s hooves.

“Sister, now is not the time.”

“You’re right, sorry.”

“Um...I’m Fluttershy. I brought Angel here with me.” The small yellow pony had her rabbit friend on her haunch as she talked with the princesses. “We were really hoping to see the royal garden today.”

“Another very interesting couple...” Celestia said, starting to wonder if her message to Twilight had been conveyed properly. Still, it was possible a pony and a rabbit...well, feelings can bond the strangest of pairs together. “I’m sure you two will find it a real treat. I am rather proud of some of the rare plants in that garden. Also, Philomena was looking forward to meeting you again, Fluttershy. I’ll let her spend the day with you in the garden, if you wish.”

“Oh, that would be lovely.” Fluttershy said before making way for the next couple.
“I am Twilight Sparkle, and I brought Trixie with me.”

“Yes, I had heard stories of ‘The Great and Powerful Trixie’.” Luna said, looking with a small bit of contempt at the blue unicorn, “Something of a traveling showpony, is she?”

“Not anymore, princess.” Trixie replied. “I have currently undertaken what might be called a study of friendship from Twilight here.”

“An excellent subject for any young pony.” Celestia said with a smile, “I hope Twilight has been a good teacher.”

“Indeed, princess. She’s the best I could have hoped for.”

Celestia had always suspected something of this sort from Twilight. She never did seem interested in the male ponies around Canterlot during her time here. Even Celestia’s nephew had tried to make her acquaintance at one point, but Twilight had had no time for any pony that couldn’t advance her magical studies. Trixie, at least from what the princess could gather, was at a decent magic user; somepony Twilight could perhaps be interested in.

“My name is Ditzzy Doo, princesses.” The next pony pair advanced before the thrones. “I work at mailings in Ponyville. This is my filly, Dinky.”

“Hello, ma’ams.”

“Ms. Librarian Twilight Sparkle gave us two tickets. We are honored to meet you.”

“And I am pleased to meet you as well, Ms Doo.” Celestia said.

“Could Mr. Doo not come with you?” Luna asked.

“Um...” Ditzzy began to blush and stared intensely at the floor. She wasn’t sure how to respond.

“Daddy’s gone on a trip.” Dinky said. “We’re not sure when he’ll be back.”

“Oh, I understand.” Celestia said, smiling warmly at the little filly. “I sincerely hope you have a wonderful time today.”

“I will, princess.” Dinky said happily.

“Rainbow Dash, Rarity, are you two here together, then?” Celestia asked of the two remaining ponies.

“No, princess.” Rarity said, a little bit upset at the implication. “I was hoping to find an eligible bachelor pony here at the Gala.”

“And I’ve got a date here already.” Rainbow Dash said. “I’m sure he’ll be at the opening ceremonies.”

“Yes, those are starting soon.” Celestia said, surprised and disappointed at the preceding event. She had

been looking forward to meeting the chosen ponies for Twilight and her friends. Instead, two of them hadn't bothered to bring anypony, one was with a rabbit, one with a sibling, and Twilight with another mare. Pinkie, the pony she had always considered the oddest, turned out to have the most 'normal' tastes. Still, Celestia did recognize that with Equestria being predominantly female, Twilight's preference for mares wasn't all that out of the ordinary.

"We should get going, sister." Luna said, sensing Celestia's disappointment. "We shouldn't be late for the start of our own party."

"You're right." Celestia said. "All of you, thank you so much for coming today. I hope you have a wonderful time. Please join us in the palace courtyard presently for the opening ceremonies."

Luna and Celestia took flight and left the room straight up, through a large hole in the roof. Everypony else went back out through the doors they had come in from. Big Macintosh hooked himself up to all three carts as they were directed by the guard ponies to the courtyard. A large crowd of ponies had already gathered there. The sun was about halfway through its ascent in the sky. The day was warming up nicely, and the crowd was buzzing with anticipation. Soon the festivities would begin.

Rainbow Dash was constantly scanning the crowd, looking for her supposed date. "Can't find him, sugarcube?" Applejack asked.

"Not yet, but he'll be here." She said.

"Y'know, I suspected since you first said you'd be meetin somepony here, but it's pretty clear now. You don't have to lie to us, Dash. It's alright you couldn't find a date."

"What? No, that's not it. I'm Rainbow Dash! Who wouldn't want to take me to a party?"

"I was kind of suspecting the same thing." Twilight Sparkle added. "Really though, it's alright. You don't have to pretend with us."

"No, he'll be here, I promise."

"Okay, Dash." Twilight said.

Princess Celestia and Luna stepped out from the castle proper onto a balcony above the crowd. The din from the ponies below quieted down as the princess began to speak. "Friends, ponies, Equestrians, lend me your ears." She began, "Today is a day for dancing. Today is a day for celebration. Today is the day of the Grand Galloping Gala." A cheer went up from the crowd at the end of that sentence. Celestia waited until they had calmed to continue. "And today is a very special Gala for me. Today is the first Gala in history that I get to celebrate with my dear sister, Princess Luna." Again, the crowd cheered. "Thank you. I'm sure you all know the...difficult past we've had, but we've been able to put that behind us. As you all celebrate today, I ask you to enjoy the games, attractions, and food provided. But I also ask you all to remember my sister. Remember that no pony is beyond redemption, and we all must be willing to forgive those who may have wronged us in the past."

The crowd broke into a large cheer, the ponies all stomping their front hooves into the ground. "And with that, my little ponies, may you enjoy the Gala!" Celestia finished her speech to even more raucous

cheering. She smiled and waved with her hoof at the crowd as Luna followed suit next to her. They both then turned and looked at the sky as three streaks appeared on the horizon. The sound of near super-sonic flight was unmistakable. The crowd barely noticed until it had passed, but the rushing sound of a patented Wonderbolt's flyover was difficult to miss.

After the flyover, the princesses took to the skies themselves and flew over the crowd to the dance floor. Their hired DJ, Vinyl Scratch, took their signal and began playing her newest mix of popular Equestrian dance tunes. The crowd began to disperse to various areas of the castle and city. Fluttershy and Angel made a beeline toward the back of the castle, guided by guard ponies to the royal garden. Applejack and Big Macintosh headed toward the refreshment area, ready to set up a Sweet Apple Acres booth. Rarity followed the princesses to the dance floor, while Dinky and Ditzzy Doo went to an information pony to determine exactly what all the attractions were. Pinkie Pie was about to head off to the games pavilion when Blues stopped her. He pointed to Rainbow Dash who was still scanning the crowd diligently.

"Do you think she really has somepony coming to meet her?" He asked.

"I'm not sure. Maybe." Pinkie said.

"Should we ask her to join us? I don't think I'd like to be left alone at a party like this."

"That's so nice of you. What a great idea." Pinkie said before approaching her friend. "Dashie, do you want to come with me and Blues? We're going to go play pin the tail on the pony!"

"Uh, no thanks Pinkie Pie, you go on ahead. I'm waiting for someone."

"Okie dokie." She said, in not quite as chipper a voice as usual. She and Blues then walked off.

Twilight and Trixie were the only two left. Spike had followed after Rarity immediately, hoping to impress her with his dancing ability. "So what do you want to do first?" Twilight asked her date.

"Whatever you wanted to do first is fine." Trixie said, still taking in the splendor of the event. "Do you think, maybe we should..." She pointed with her hoof over to Rainbow Dash who was now flying erratically as she searched the crowd.

"No, I think it'd be better if we left her alone." Twilight said. "Why don't we start over by the games? You may not have guessed from looking at me, but I'm pretty good at horseshoes."

Twilight and her date sauntered off to the games area. They noticed Blues failing horribly at pin-the-tail; leaving a pony with a tail sticking out of its snout as Pinkie laughed next to him. He quickly joined in the laughter after removing his blindfold. They walked past other games areas filled with ponies enjoying sports such as tug of war, badminton, and more normal carnival games, like a test of strength and a gold-fish toss where contestants could win a pet gold-fish if they threw a small plastic ball into the right bowl.

They had to wait a small while for the line of ponies ahead of them, but Twilight and Trixie eventually got into a two-on-two match with a very spirited unicorn and earth pony couple. The game was incredibly close, with Trixie throwing a ringer in the eleventh inning to win 21 to 18. Having won, the two claimed the right to keep the sandbox and take on the next challengers, but they were quickly dispatched by a pair of

male unicorns who they later learned were widely recognized as one of the top five horseshoes teams in Canterlot.

The pair then decided to take a leisurely stroll through the royal garden. It was built almost like a natural maze, its walls made of high shrubs with dirt paths winding throughout. Many other ponies were there, walking slowly and enjoying the beautiful, rare flowers lining the paths inside the shrubs, as well as multiple larger areas inside showcasing patterns and pictures made with multi-colored flower arrangements.

They met up with Fluttershy near the entrance. She was in the middle of explaining to Philomena why she shouldn't try to catch Angel, who was currently cowering underneath the yellow pegasus pony. The phoenix gave a caw through its mischievous smile as she glared at the frightened bunny. Twilight had never seen Angel scared before, and it was a strange sight to witness the normally arrogant and somewhat controlling rabbit almost scared for its life.

"I'm serious, Philomena." Fluttershy said, "You can't do that to poor little creatures. Besides, Angel is my friend. I know you wouldn't really hurt him, but you shouldn't scare him like that."

"Caaaw!" replied the bird.

"Hi, Fluttershy! Enjoying the garden?"

"Oh, hello Twilight. Yes, it's very nice."

"Philomena giving you a bit of trouble?"

"Just a little. I know she'll be nice from now on though, right?"

"Caw."

Trixie giggled a little, prompting the bunny to come out from under his protector and stamp his foot angrily in front of her. He just couldn't stand this pony laughing at his misfortune. "Sorry, Angel." Trixie said in apology, trying hard not to laugh at him. His cute appearance made it difficult for Trixie to take his anger seriously.

The five formed a small group and explored the outlay more together. They saw an outcropping of Poison Joke, a flower all too familiar to Fluttershy and Twilight, who had to explain their encounter with the flower to Trixie. They continued on, often mentioning a particular flower or arrangement they found interesting. This calming walk continued on until Trixie's stomach began to growl fiercely. She blushed slightly and said, "I think my body wants me to eat something. Would that be alright, Twilight?"

"Yeah, now's a good time to go eat. Care to join us, Fluttershy?"

"Thank you, Twilight, but Angel and I are going to stay here."

"Caw" Answered Philomena, flying over the group as she had during their time in the garden.

"I guess that means you're staying too. Well, have fun, you all." Twilight said as she and Trixie found their

way back through the winding garden paths and into the large food court. Numerous different ponies had set up shops inside the Gala. They were selling many different kinds of food and drink for the patrons. Twilight saw stands with popcorn, cupcakes, sarsaparilla, ice cream sundaes, cherries and carrots and watercress sandwiches, and many other forms of pony delicacies. In the middle of the food court, Twilight and Trixie noticed Rainbow Dash sitting at one of the dining tables with nothing in front of her and an open space to her left. She was looking over at one of the food stands when Twilight approached.

“Hi Rainbow Dash, what are you doing?”

“Oh, hi guys!” She said, “My date just left to get us some grub, so I’m here holding this seat.”

“Uh huh.” Twilight said suspiciously. “Which way did he go?”

“Oh, I lost him. I was trying to figure out what sort of food he was getting, but I guess it’ll just be a surprise.”

“It is packed around here. I can see where you’d lose another pony pretty quickly.” Trixie said.

“Well, I hope you two have a great lunch.” Twilight said as she left.

“Isn’t that kind of sad?” Twilight asked Trixie after they were out of earshot.

“What do you mean?”

“She won’t even admit to us that she doesn’t have a date. I don’t mind so much that she doesn’t have anypony, but I wish she’d just come clean with us instead of pretending she’s actually with someone.”

“I dunno, maybe there really is somepony here with her?” Trixie offered. “I know false boasting when I see it, and she really didn’t seem to be lying to us.”

The two continued on to find an appropriate stand when they were stopped by a long, almost unmoving line of mares in their path. They looked to determine where this line lead, and saw at the very front a small wooden counter with the sign “Sweet Apple Acres” above it. They skipped around the line to talk with Twilight’s good friend Applejack, and maybe get a free sample or two.

“Howdy fellahs.” Applejack said when she noticed the two unicorns. “Sure is somethin’, ain’t it? We’re gonna sell out by supper time at this rate!”

Twilight looked at the stand and saw that Big Macintosh, instead of Applejack, was the primary seller. He was constantly moving back and forth between the counter and the carts of raw apples and other treats they had brought. Each mare in line sighed happily after telling him their order and watched the stallion as he filled their food-related wishes.

“Are you sure you’re okay with what’s going on?” Twilight asked. Being in the back row on the journey to Canterlot, Twilight hadn’t heard Applejack’s real reason for bringing Big Macintosh to the gala. She was still under the impression that Big Macintosh was Applejack’s ‘special pony’.

"Of course! Why wouldn't I be? We're gonna get at least enough to fix up the barn and buy a new plow. Not sure about granny's hip though, what with medical costs going up and all that."

"No, I mean, look at how all the mares are fawning over him."

"Well shoot, I can't blame 'em. He's the manliest stallion here, that's for sure. Not all uppity and delicate like these here Canterlot males. Nosirree, he's a real working horse, he is."

"But isn't he...um...your date? Aren't you jealous of all the attention he's getting?"

"Twilight, he's my brother, why would I be...Oh, sweet Celestia. Why does everypony always think I want to bed my brother?!"

Applejack may have said that last line a bit too loudly, as many of the mares toward the front of the line stopped what conversations they were having and stared at the tan mare. Applejack blushed deeply, drooped her ears and lowered her head, trying to hide behind the wooden counter she had set up. "Geeze Twilight, now everypony's looking at me."

"I'm sorry Applejack, it's just..."

"No, I get it, that's fine. But honestly, if you'd get the word out I'm not interested in my brother physically, that would be nice."

"I'm sorry, Applejack, really I am." Twilight said turning to go. She had taken just two steps away from the stand when the crowd near the stand let out a collective gasp. Looking back Twilight and Trixie saw none other than Princess Luna approach the humble apple stand. The ponies around the stand bowed as Luna went straight to the front of the line and ordered an apple fritter. "I've heard such wonderful things about this stand today." She said, smiling at Big Macintosh, "And its dashing worker."

Twilight saw Luna lean in and whisper something into Big Macintosh's ear. She thought she could see him blushing slightly, but it was difficult to tell under his already red coat. Luna smiled again, took the fritter and flew off back toward the castle. Big Macintosh returned to his customers with the smirk of a pony who'd just heard a particularly juicy secret.

"What was that all about?" Trixie asked.

"I'm not sure." Twilight said, "Still, I don't think it's our business. Now, what should we eat?"

The two ponies decided on some popcorn with a bottle of sarsaparilla and a carrot and cucumber sandwich each. They tried to find Rainbow Dash, but she had already left her spot by the time they returned. They found a nice spot at one of the tables and discussed how the time had been just flying by so far that day. It was already mid afternoon by the time they finished eating.

"Want to hit up the dance floor?" Trixie asked, ready to partake in the Gala's most well known event.

"I suppose so." Twilight replied, "But I have to warn you, I think I might have been born with four left hooves."

"It's alright." Trixie said, laughing. "I'll lead."

When they arrived at the dance floor, the first thing they set about doing was finding their friends. Rarity was standing off alone, forming part of a large ring of ponies who stood in a circle around the floor. They were all waiting for another to ask them to dance it seemed, looking anxiously for anypony who would approach them at the start of a song. Spike the dragon was out on the floor, dancing happily with Dinky to one of Vinyl Scratch's patented dance mixes. Ditzzy Doo was dancing near the pair with an unknown stallion. Twilight and Trixie went over to Rarity to find out how the day had been going for her, while also waiting for the next song to join in the dancing.

"Rarity! How have you been, dear?" Trixie asked, almost mimicking Rarity's airy style of talking.

"Oh, it's you. Hmph. I'm doing fine, thank you. How has your day been, Twilight?"

"It's been wonderful so far! We played horseshoes, and toured the garden and had a great lunch. How about you? Have you had a chance to dance with Prince Astron yet?"

"No." She said sadly, pointing to a large white unicorn out on the floor. "He's been on and off the floor for the past few hours, but he's been surrounded by mares the whole time. I don't want to be just another groupie to him, so I'll wait here until he notices my unmatched grace and fashion sense."

"Well, suit yourself." Twilight said, "But you know there's someone who will dance with you in a heartbeat."

"Yes, I know, but Spike seems to be having a good time anyway."

"I guess so." Twilight said, looking back at the smiling dragon's face.

"Alright fillies and gentlecolts." A voice boomed over the speakers, "It's time for the more formal dances to begin. We'll return to the party mixes later, but the next hour by request of Princess Luna herself is ballroom dancing only."

"Oh, perfect!" Trixie said, walking out onto the floor with Twilight in tow. "I simply love these classic dances. Just follow my lead, and do your best not to bump into my hooves."

The pairs of ponies lined up across from each other. Most were male-female but plenty of mare-mare pairs were present as well. The two lines bowed to each other as a set of strings was heard making their first chord on the record. The song was a classical foxtrot and the two lines approached. Twilight and Trixie met face-to-face and began the steps. First Trixie stepped forward and to the left as Twilight followed backward. The pony couples spun off and began to fill the dance floor, leaving Trixie and Twilight practically alone near the center.

The rest of the world seemed to fade away as Trixie got into the rhythm of the dance. Two slow steps followed by two quick steps. She couldn't get too fancy with an inexperienced partner, but began to incorporate some turns and spins into the basic front and back routine as Twilight appeared to become more comfortable. Their hooves rarely even touched each other, but the two ponies could feel the connection of their bodies moving in time together. They moved and twirled around the dance floor, forgetting even the existence of anyone other than the pony in front of them.

The music continued for what seemed like forever for the pair, all of their thoughts focused on the face staring back at them. The music was quickly coming to an end and Trixie could tell the moment would fade. She stepped in toward Twilight when she wasn't expecting it and places a hoof around her back. She pushed Twilight from the front with her free hoof and caused the pony to bend backward over her other hoof. Twilight was too shocked to stop this from happening, but ended up in a perfectly executed dip just as the song finished..

Twilight and Trixie stayed there for a few moments, staring deeply into each other's eyes. They were only jolted out of their personal world by the sound of hooves against the pavement. The other party guests were applauding their performance. "What a marvelous dance." They heard one of the other attendees say. "I haven't seen classic dancing like that in a long time." Another voice called out.

The two bowed to the crowd and walked off the floor. "That was wonderful, Trixie." Twilight said.

"Ha, I hear that a lot." Trixie replied.

"That was amazing!" Rainbow Dash said, trotting up to her friend from the ring of ponies. "Where'd you learn to dance like that?"

"Well, actually..." Trixie began, "Steven taught me while I was in the forest."

"You're kidding! You know that crazy serpent?"

"Yes. He was just about the only friend I had."

"Well that's awesome."

"So where's your date?" Twilight asked, still noticing the lack of another pony by Dash's side.

"He just had to use the bathroom, then we're going to dance the night away!"

"Oh, okay Dash." Twilight said.

As she did, Twilight felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned to see a pony she didn't recognize. The pony was bright yellow, with blue-green mane and tail. Her cutie mark was three hearts, two the same color as her mane and one a deeper shade of green. "Excuse me, ma'am." She said, "I'm Lemon Hearts. I was just wondering if I could borrow your partner for a dance?"

"Oh, yes, by all means. That is, if you want to, Trixie."

"Certainly!" She said, beginning to walk off with the new arrival. "But don't worry Twilight, I'll save the last dance for you."

As the two went off to catch the start of another song, Twilight felt another tap at her shoulder. She turned again and was greeted this time by a large white unicorn with dark blond mane and tail. His cutie mark was a large star with four gold points overlaying four purple points. Twilight recognized him as the distant nephew of Celestia, the Prince Astron.

"Hello, Twilight, was it?" He said in a deep, comforting voice. "My aunt Celestia talks about you often. She

is very impressed by the progress you're making in Ponyville."

"I'm..um..does she?" Twilight asked, flustered to be in the presence of a stallion so imposing not just in stature but also in status.

"She does." He replied. "I was wondering if you wanted to discuss some of your finding on friendship. Perhaps during this next song?" He asked, pointing to the dance floor.

"Yes, I'd love to." Twilight said, smiling as he led her away from the large throng of mares following behind him.

She made her way back onto the dance floor just as the previous song was ending. She and the prince lined up on opposite sides of the floor as she had with Trixie. So entranced was she with the prince that she just then noticed Princess Luna was immediately to her left. "Hello, Twilight." Luna said when she was finally recognized.

"Princess Luna! What are you doing here?" Twilight asked.

"Well, this party is being held in my castle, after all." She replied with a chuckle.

"I mean, who are you dancing with."

"Oh, I think you may have met. Take a look, he's right next to your dance partner, I believe."

Twilight looked just to Astron's right and saw that she did indeed know the pony who was to be Princess Luna's partner. It was Big Macintosh, apparently done with work and ready to party hard enough to make up for lost time.

The music started and the two sides approached. This particular number was a form of waltz. Twilight was again unfamiliar with the steps, but Prince Ashton was a natural on the dance floor. He lead her in the proper manner, and they began to talk when Twilight was comfortable enough with the pattern.

"So tell me how you find Ponyville. Do you like it better than your time in Canterlot?"

"Well, I am farther from the university, and from princess Celestia, but I'm finally figuring out what it means to have real friends. I suppose you could say I prefer the city of Canterlot but the people of Ponyville."

"Are the people of Canterlot really that distasteful?"

"No, that's not it." Twilight said, hoping to defend her statement. "I just didn't really give them a chance. I was always too interested in books and not enough in people. I'm sure the people in Canterlot are lovely as well."

"Some of them" Astron replied. "Others...well...I think I may prefer the kind of people in your Ponyville, to be truthful."

"How do you mean?"

"Take a look at her, over there." Astron said, motioning toward Rarity. "She's so interested in how she appears to others, and so possessive and caring of her clothes, she can't take the time to even notice ponies she doesn't consider worthy of her. I don't think she's danced with one pony all day. She's the kind I can't stand here in Canterlot. They're too self-important, with hugely inflated egos. I'd much rather spend time with a pony who's more like your Spike. He's been out here all day, dancing with whoever will join him. I've seen him specifically pick out ponies who hadn't had anyone dance with them for a long time and invite them to the floor. He's the kind of caring individual this city needs more of. Being his caretaker, I assume I can attribute his kindness to you."

"Well, I wouldn't go that far." Twilight responded.

"I think it might not be that far from the truth." He said. "I talked to that dragon for a little while. He seems like a very decent fellow. I hope I'm still around when he grows up. Equestria would be a better place if all dragons were like him. He told me the story behind your, shall we say, unusual choice of dress as well."

"Oh that, well, it's not that big a deal."

"It reveals your character, Twilight Sparkle. And that character is one I find most attractive." He said seriously, looking once more into her eyes. The music stopped. It seemed so abrupt. They had been too engrossed in conversation to recognize the musical cues signaling the song's end. Astron recovered quickly and bowed to his partner. "It was a pleasure making your acquaintance, Ms. Sparkle. I hope we will have the chance to meet again soon."

Twilight stood dumbfounded as Prince Astron strode off. She would have stood in place a bit longer had she not heard her name begin called. "Hey Twilight, over here!"

It was Rainbow Dash, calling her over from along the dance floor. She DID have somepony next to her. Twilight went to meet her friend and the mysterious pony at her side. From a distance, she thought it was simply a blue-coated pony, but when she got closer she saw it actually a blue uniform. She then saw the aviator goggles resting atop the pony's head and knew who it had to be.

"Twilight, allow me to introduce my date: Colonel Colt, leader of the Wonderbolts."

"Nice to meet you, Twilight." He said, shaking her hoof with two of his own.

"So, how did you two meet?" Twilight asked.

"Well, our first meeting was when she interrupted one of our shows." He replied, "But later we spent a lot of time together after she won the Best Young Flyer competition. We just hit it off, and I'm still trying to convince her to join us right away."

Rainbow Dash laughed, "I know, but I told you, I'm not ready yet. The time commitment is just too much. I couldn't spend any time with my friends. Give me a year or two first."

"Whatever you say, Dashie." He said, smiling at her. "So, should we dance?"

"Oh yeah!" Dash replied, grabbing her date and dragging him over to the floor.

'So she really had somepony all along.' Twilight thought as she watched them go. She looked around at the growing crowd surrounding the dance floor. The hour for formal dancing was almost up. Twilight knew when that happened most of the ponies present would break for supper, followed by a few more hours or activities before the closing ceremonies. She saw Astron talking with a few of the mares surrounding him and turned away quickly when his eyes met hers. She also noticed Spike and Dinky standing next to Rarity, and Ditzzy, Big Macintosh, and Trixie out on the dance floor with their respective partners. Twilight could also pick out Pinkie Pie and Blues dancing to a lively tango. She hadn't seen them arrive, but that was pretty standard when Pinkie Pie was involved.

Rarity, in the meantime, was utterly crushed. Prince Astron, the pony of her dreams had been ignoring her all day. But one little dance with Trixie, and suddenly he approached Twilight Sparkle and wanted to dance with HER? Rarity didn't know what had gone wrong. She had styled her hair perfectly. Her dress was magnificent, by far the best of any pony at the Gala. Hoity Toity himself had told her today how much he enjoyed seeing her handiwork on the ponies around the Gala. But still, Astron chose Twilight, despite her old, plain, inferior outfit.

She was on the verge of tears at her misfortune when she was graced with a most unique visitor. Princess Celestia herself had come to the dance floor to talk with Rarity.

"Rarity, are you not having a good time?" The princess asked. "I thought this Gala would be right up your alley."

"Oh, the Gala itself is fine. I just don't understand why nopony will dance with me."

"Is that the problem?" Celestia asked. "I'm sure there are many stallions here that would love to dance with a mare as beautiful as you."

"Maybe." Rarity said, "But the only one I really wanted to dance with was your nephew, and he doesn't even know that I exist."

"Rarity." Celestia said in her most gentle voice, "He's the only stallion you want to dance with? Are you rejecting all others out of hoof, before even giving them a chance?"

"Well, I guess so."

"I think you've got a very common problem. Rarity, are you letting your idea of perfect get in the way of excellent?"

"What are you talking about, Princess?"

"Well, in your mind, Astron is the perfect pony for you, right?"

"Of course. He's handsome, charming, and a marvelous dancer."

"And you think there is no one else in Equestria with those same qualities?"

"There might be..."

“Rarity, life doesn’t just happen. You can’t wait on the sidelines here, expecting a dashing, considerate, perfect male to sweep you off your hooves. You’ve got to get out there, let the stallions know you’re interested in dancing, meeting them. Let them know you want to know them. Show interest in them. You’ve been standing here all day, staring at Astron. What chance does another male have against your ideal of the perfect mate? Who would even take the chance when your standards are absolute perfection?”

“Rarity?” Spike interrupted, trying for the umpteenth time today to get just one dance in with his perfect pony. He was just going through the motions of being rejected again, so he didn’t even realize Princess Celestia was right next to her. “I know you’ve said no, like, twenty eight times now, but I would be honored if you would give me this dance.”

“Spike, you know I’m waiting for...I mean, yes, Spike. I’d love to.”

“Really? You would?”

“Yes, Spike, let’s.”

“Hmm...guess I spoke too soon.” Celestia said as the two left.

“Fillies and gentlecolts, your attention please.” The voice boomed out once again. “This will be our last dance for the formal hour. After this we’ll get back to your regularly scheduled dance jams, so grab your date and get ready for one last dance before things get crazy out on the floor again.”

Twilight watched the ponies she knew out on the dance floor. Almost her entire group of friends were out there, dancing happily with their partners. She could guess how fast Spike’s heart was beating with one hand on Rarity’s neck and the other holding on to one of her legs. Rainbow Dash and Colonel Colt had found some way to turn a slow waltz into a kind of break dance. She wasn’t sure exactly what they were doing, but they both seemed to be having fun nonetheless. She smiled as Blues tried to reign in Pinkie’s rambunctiousness for another slow-tempo song, thinking how much easier it would be when the songs got faster and louder later on.

Spike in particular was having a very difficult time. He wasn’t accustomed to formal ballroom dances and was trying his best not to trip up Rarity. The mare for her part was smiling at Spike, but he couldn’t tell if it was out of pity or happiness. Regardless, his heart was racing. Being able to hold Rarity like this was a pleasure he never thought he’d attain. The song went on as they moved cautiously around the dance floor, making sure not to bump into any other couples.

At the song’s conclusion, Spike felt a pang of regret. He hadn’t said a single word to her throughout, and knew that now she’d go off again to pine away for prince Astron. He bowed to Rarity as he’d seen the ponies do at the end of earlier songs. Rarity bowed back and leaned in to kiss him quickly on the cheek. Spike floated on air, and he could almost see pink hearts float around his head as Rarity said, “Thank you, Spike. Let’s do this again soon.”

“Yes, yes definitely!” He replied euphorically. Rarity said, “Phew, I am famished,” before trotting off to the food court. She had literally been standing all day in hopes of catching the eye of the prince, and had completely skipped lunch. “I’ll be back soon, Spike. Then let’s dance again, alright?”

"I'll be waiting, m'lady." The purple dragon responded happily.

The party went on deep into the night. Luna excused herself for a small amount of time to raise the moon but quickly returned to continue dancing with Big Macintosh, after wrenching him away from another mare who had foolishly decided to dance with him in the meantime.

Fluttershy eventually came over to talk with Twilight who was quietly sipping on some punch and watching the dancing. The couples danced for many songs, and the other areas of the Gala had in fact begun to pack up. Prizes were awarded for the many different games at various times after night fall. The pair Twilight and Trixie had lost to earlier won a small prize for most won games of horseshoes, and Blues even got a 'fake' trophy for funniest tail-pinning. He left it with Twilight while he and Pinkie were dancing. Spike and Rarity danced together off and on, with Spike graciously allowing himself to be replaced by the many stallions at the Gala now wanting to dance with her. Apparently they had all been too intimidated before. One of them even mentioned how he wanted to ask her to dance, but her beauty was so imposing he was afraid. Then he finally decided if a baby dragon had enough courage to dance with her, then he did too.

Applejack had long since packed up the empty apple carts along with all the profits from today in the waiting chariots at the castle, and was watching the dancing with a mix of pride and contempt. She was very happy her brother was so popular, but a touch upset that nopony was as interested in her. "Still," She said to her friends, "I did what I set out to do. The apple family is going to put all this money to good use."

Twilight watched Trixie with some pride as well. She seemed to be most popular with the mares, but danced with a fair share of stallions as well. She changed partners every third song like clockwork, never getting too attached to any one pony. Ditzzy danced with many different partners as well, her lazy eye becoming something of a sure-fire conversation starter. Dinky was never far from her side, but was able to meet a few younger colts herself with whom to spend some happy hours dancing.

By the time Trixie came back for the last dance with Twilight, she was almost worn out. "I'm sorry Twilight, but I think you'll have to lead this time."

"I'll do my best, Trixie." She said, following her friend onto the dance floor.

At the closing ceremonies, Celestia and Luna once again appeared over the whole crowd of ponies from the balcony, although the crowd was noticeably smaller than it had been that morning.

"Thank you all so much for a wonderful Grand Galloping Gala." Celestia began, "I know myself and my sister had a marvelous time with all of you, and I hope you all had a great time as well. I just wanted to thank you for a very pleasant past year as your ruler, and look forward to many more years of peace and prosperity here in Equestria. I hope to see you all at the Gala next year!"

The crowd cheered their approval as the royal pair reentered the castle. Yawns were heard through the crowd as Twilight and her group headed back to where their chariots waited. Rainbow Dash said a heartfelt goodbye to Colonel Colt, with him giving her a loud smooch before they parted. Ditzzy had a small collection of mailing address from interested males she had danced with, though her pile was dwarfed by Rarity's.

Fluttershy left with a rare moonflower given to her by princess Luna placed behind her ear.

The group stepped back into their chariots and waited as Luna came out to say goodbye to all those present, and Big Macintosh in particular. She then thanked them all for attending and flew off into the castle. The guards were hitched up to their designated chariots and took off toward Ponyville.

The ride home was easier on the guards, since they were able to mostly glide down instead of flying upward, and had a greatly lightened load. Upon arriving home, the ponies all parted their separate ways, Trixie going back with Twilight for one more night in the tree house.

“So, do you think you might want to move into Ponyville?” Twilight asked.

“I do. Do you know of any good builder ponies who could help me get a house constructed?”

“Not right now, but I’m sure I can find somepony.”

“That would be great. Thanks again for letting me use your dress. I’m sorry you had to spend the whole day in that one.”

“It’s really alright, Trixie. I had a great time today anyway.”

“I did too, Twilight. Thank you.”

“Me three!” Spike said from Twilight’s rump. “It was the best night ever.”

“Hehe, it sure was, Spike.”

After arriving at the Treehouse, Spike and Trixie went straight to bed. Twilight, however, decided to stay up and write the princess a letter about the past few days.

Dear Princess Celestia,

I learned so many lessons about friendship these past couple of days that it’s difficult to know where to start. I learned that sometimes, with forgiveness and compassion, old enemies can become new friends. I learned that helping others and making sure another pony has a good time can be a great way to make sure you have a good time as well, and I learned that

knock knock knock

Twilight was interrupted by a loud knocking at the door. She couldn’t imagine who would still be up this late, but she went to the door and opened it. Standing on the other side was Prince Astron with a chariot and two guard ponies just behind him.

“Prince, what are you doing here?” She asked.

“I just remembered that I forgot to give you my address.” He said, handing over a small slip of paper.

“Please, write me. Let me know if you’re free this weekend. I would like to know more about your studies on friendship.” He kissed her gently on the cheek and walked back to his chariot. The Prince rode off into the sky with Twilight watching. She eventually stopped staring at the empty night and finished her note.

And I learned that kindness, caring, and a good heart always shine more brilliantly than even the best made dress.

Your faithful student,

Twilight Sparkle.