

Chapter Two: A Social Unraveling

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"Twilight Sparkle, you've performed well above expectations. I couldn't have chosen a better protégé."

Sunlight flooded the vast, open hall in columns that appeared almost tangible. Important looking ponies in fancy dresses and suits milled about, undoubtedly busy with whatever errands Princess Celestia had provided them with in the interest of keeping Equestria running smoothly.

But not me, Twilight happily reflected. *My job is to spend all day with Princess Celestia and explain my findings.*

Spike followed close behind the purple unicorn, carrying as many books as he could. Of course, that wasn't nearly enough. Several attendants followed him as well, each one bearing saddle bags loaded with volume upon volume of literature that Twilight had written herself.

And she's going to let me read each and every one to her!

Twilight could just squeal with glee.

"Oh, Twilight?"

"Yes, Princess Celestia?"

"I think there's someone at the door."

"Someone at the...?"

Twilight watched with horror as Celestia transformed from a majestic alicorn to her draconic familiar, Spike. The royal hall faded out as Twilight's prestigious series of books vanished into the ether.

Reality slid into focus, an all too familiar reptilian face peering over the edge of the bed. Twilight groaned, mourning the abrupt end to her wonderful dream, rolling over with intent to try and pick up where she left off.

A loud, rapid banging sounded through the darkened library.

"Yep, they're still at the door."

The unicorn groaned again, sitting up, reluctantly leaving the warmth and comfort of her bed. It wasn't even dawn. Stars still glimmered in the sky, a nearly full moon hanging just over the horizon.

"These ponies are **crazy**."

The banging continued almost nonstop until Twilight finally flung the door open, sure that she must look like a complete mess to whoever stood outside. She had expected to see Pinkie Pie, but instead found herself face to face with Rainbow Dash. The rainbow-maned pegasus looked as though she had just seen a ghost.

"Applebloom and Scootaloo got bitten by the thing that bit Applebloom last night!" Before Twilight could even begin a sentence, Rainbow continued. "They're being moved to the clinic right now. Applejack told me to get you because you might have books about this kind of thing."

"Wha- Wow... Okay give me a minute here. I only just reorganized today. Yesterday. Is it even tomorrow yet?"

Impatient and growing frustrated, Dash took to the air. "Whatever, just get any books you have on monsters and head to the doctor's!"

With that, Twilight found herself with a rapidly shrinking silhouette of Rainbow Dash as the pegasus arced over the town and landed out of sight several blocks away.

"Okay, that's just great..." She turned sluggishly, stumbling toward the book shelf as her brain attempted to process the sudden, frantic slurry of information. Twilight nearly dropped the book she was levitating when her thoughts finally clicked into place.

"Oh my gosh!"

Not ten seconds had passed before the knocking resumed.

No less clumsily, but with haste fueled by urgency and a bit of frustration, the unicorn made her way to the door again. And again, she found herself faced with Rainbow Dash. Something about the pegasus felt different, though.

"You didn't even give me a chance to find any books, Rainbow Dash! This isn't-"

"Yeah I know. Sorry for blowing up at you like that. I realized maybe you'd have better luck finding what you're looking for if I came inside and helped you."

Twilight tried to focus her eyes in the dim light of the candle floating beside her. Then it struck her, as she locked eyes with the blue pegasus. Immediately, Rainbow took a step back, her face cloaked with shadow.

"No, that's alright, I've got everything under control here. You should make sure everyone arrives safely." The unicorn attempted to take a step closer, levitating the candle between herself and Rainbow Dash. "What's up with your eyes?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all." The flickering light caught slivers of emerald in her irises. The pegasus took another step back, spreading her wings in silhouette. "You're sure you don't want me to come in?"

"Rainbow Dash?"

"Sorry I asked. I should get going."

The pegasus flapped, but not at the ground. The first gust billowed around Twilight, snuffing out the candle and tossing her already bed messed hair. Only then did she lift off, streaking out into the night, passing the doctor's office completely. A violent shudder passed through the unicorn, and she shut the door tightly against the darkness.

"Spike..." Twilight glanced up at the balcony, where the dragon waited with eyelids that were weighted with exhaustion. "Rainbow Dash has magenta eyes, right?"

"Huh? Oh, I think they're more like maroon eyes, I guess. Why?"

The unicorn glanced over at the book on her desk, illuminated by a single beam of moonlight. A shadow flickered briefly over the cover, causing Twilight to direct her attention to the window.

An emerald glow behind the glass, gone in the blink of an eye.

"Spike, you are not to let anyone in the library unless I give permission. Understand?"

"Okay...?" Twilight stomped a hoof, shooting a cold glare up at Spike. "Okay, okay! I understand!"

"I'm going to the doctor's office now. When I come back, I want you to look me in the eyes, very closely. If my eyes are any color other than purple, do not let me inside."

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Fluttershy awoke with a gasp, drenched with cold sweat, glancing around frantically as she expected to see the creature standing over her again, leering with that jagged-fanged smile. Instead she was met with dawn, the walls of her bedroom painted a fiery orange as Celestia slowly brought the sun over the horizon. The last chirping crickets subsided as birds began their warm up routines for a day full of singing. She was alone. Her breast rose as she heaved a sigh, relieved, though still disturbed by the figure that had haunted her in her sleep. The pegasus reflected on her experience, trying to remember how the creature had entered her room, but found herself unable to do so. The creature's departure marked the end of the nightmare. Fluttershy put a hoof to her forehead, groaning softly as she tried her hardest to forget what personal horrors she had dreamt up, until a thought suddenly struck her.

The windowsill. As quickly as she could manage, the pegasus rolled out of bed and drowsily carried herself to the wooden frame. Nothing. No red smudges, no trace of any passage through the space between the window itself and the frame which held it. Relief was nearly tangible now that there was no evidence of any sort to the coming and going of some monster. In the grass below, a few early birds did their best to snatch worms out of the ground, fluttering around one another in colorful arguments over pecking order. She decided to join them. Even trotting on the tips of her hooves, the floorboards creaked dryly under her weight.

I hope Mahara is having more pleasant dreams than I was, at least...

Sure enough, the red mare was still and tranquil under the covers, not even wiggling an ear as Fluttershy descended into the living room. She had intended to just head straight outside, but something about Mahara gave reason for pause. The pegasus took a few careful steps closer, trying to get a better look. There was nothing specifically different about Mahara, and yet, Fluttershy felt that her new friend looked absolutely ravishing. Her coat seemed to glisten in the low rays of filtered sunlight, her mane like a crimson river.

The pegasus shuddered.

I guess my barn door does swing that way, she realized while doing her best to quell a sudden flood of dirty thoughts.

She had fantasized in the past, but usually about handsome stallions, and never in the presence of any of them. Fluttershy only indulged even the tamest fantasies in complete privacy. Despite her best efforts, however, she could not hold back the wealth of imagined lewdness. Blushing with shame over her inability to keep her arousal in check and unable to spend another moment in the presence of her beautifully peaceful friend, the pegasus made for the door as quickly as she could.

I haven't felt like that since... Memories of cold nights made warm by her stallion, sticky heat against her mattress, falling asleep in his strong embrace.

These were fond memories once. Now they were little more than painful reminders.

Outside, a thin mist clung to the treeline, slowly curling skyward as the rising sun baked moisture off the grass and leaves. No sooner had Fluttershy set hoof outdoors did the birds around the cottage immediately flock to her, greeting her with an array of cheerful songs. She smiled and nodded politely to each bird in turn, a few of them perching on her as she made her way down the path. Looking for a distraction, she decided a little exercise couldn't hurt. An attempt at exercise, at least. She glanced back at the birds, motioning for them to take to the air as she lightly flapped her wings.

Using the downward slope of the hill to help, Fluttershy stepped into a canter, gradually building speed, doing her best to control her breathing as her heart began to pound. She had never been athletic, of course, and the exercise ended almost as swiftly as it had begun, the pegasus panting at the bottom of the hill. Midway through her climb back to the top, however, she noticed that the door had opened. Only then did she also notice that the birds had departed as well, watching from more distant branches. Heavy as she was, the sound of Mahara's voice nearly made her take to the air.

"Sorry..." she nearly whispered upon noting Fluttershy's startled expression. "I guess I snuck up on you again. I'll try to work on that."

The pegasus found herself smiling, a gesture that was warmly returned.

"You said you wanted to talk..." Mahara began, "About last night? Well, do you still want to?"

"I um... A lot of things have happened to me in the last few months. I'm pretty sure I mentioned it, but I didn't used to be this fat..." The pegasus cringed slightly at her own words, but continued.

"And um... I feel like it's made me kind of distant from a few of my friends, especially Rarity, who... I... Well, I used to think of her as my best and closest friend." Slowly, Fluttershy trotted closer to her cottage, glancing back at Mahara momentarily. "And I know she meant well, trying to tell me to slim down, I really appreciated it and all... But..."

The pegasus stopped short of the doorway, leaning against the wall.

Fluttershy felt Mahara gently nuzzle the back of her neck, encouraging the pegasus to finish her thought. "I don't think I can do it... I don't want to disappoint anypony, but it's really hard work. Rarity has offered to go on trots with me and things like that but I just don't have the stamina for it."

"Well alright, how do you feel about it?"

"I've gotten... I mean, I'm getting used to being... um... soft... so it doesn't bother me all that much like it did at first, usually... I don't like to think that I'm giving up so much as accepting it and moving on, like what one of Twilight's books told me to do... But I don't think my other friends will see it that way."

The pegasus bit her lip, lowering herself to the cool grass with a soft grunt, Mahara following her example.

"And um... Twilight's books are really helping me keep my thoughts in line, so I'm not really worried about regressing back to where I was... It's just..." She stopped until Mahara gave her another gentle nudge. "Getting like this has been a pretty big change for me, and I'm afraid I might have lost Rarity... Because I look different... I'm rambling though... Sorry..."

Mahara smiled and shook her head.

"Not at all. I'm a very good listener, I think."

The pegasus smiled as well, nodding lightly.

“So um... The whole point of that was... Um... I can't... That is... You and I... I don't want this to be an act of desperation on my part... I'm worried that I'll just be using you for the attention I haven't really been getting from anyone else recently. I don't want you to feel like you're a replacement.”

“A replacement? For whom?”

“My um... My colt friend...” The timid pegasus cast her gaze downward. “I... I'd rather not talk about that right now, though...”

“That's fine. I understand.”

Fluttershy felt her face growing warm as she continued to idly watch the grass, cheeks blushing brightly behind her yellow coat.

“And um... I've never had feelings for another mare... I mean, until now... So I um... I'm a little worried about that too... If I'm just overreacting or... If I really do feel this way about you... That's what I've been um... trying to figure out.”

Silence filled the space between the two ponies, but Fluttershy felt as if a weight had been removed from her breast now that she had admitted her fears. She glanced briefly up at Mahara, only to find her gazing out over the countryside, as if deep in thought. Her emerald eyes turned toward the pegasus once again, another smile finding its way to Mahara's lips. A spark of doubt flickered in the back of her mind, terrified for an instant that the red mare would laugh, or simply leave, but instead, she raised a hoof to the underside of Fluttershy's muzzle, lifting her head as one would lift the blooming petals of a rose. The pegasus did not tremble this time.

“Well...” Mahara paused, then leaned in a bit closer, continuing in a gentle whisper. “I think I know a way to find out how you really feel...”

Now Fluttershy was trembling, but not with nervousness.

This was anticipation.

“Close your eyes...”

Without being told what to do next, Fluttershy pursed her lips as Mahara's warmth drew nearer; near enough to feel, near enough to hear the soft exhale as their muzzles met tenderly. A gentle, sliding pressure against her coat; the feel of hooves rubbing the side of her neck, gliding over the curve of her back. Her imagination was teeming with a blur of passionate fantasy and the sensory overload of reality. Her heart felt ready to burst, her breaths reduced to shallow gasps, wings spreading wide and fluttering compulsively as she let go of every reservation and every inhibition. She felt whole again for the first time in what seemed like an eternity.

This was her moment, and she intended to enjoy it as much as possible.

Even if it had felt like time was standing still, when Fluttershy withdrew from the embrace and opened her eyes, she realized that Celestia had certainly not stopped the sun just for her. Shadows receded gradually in the early light, the multitudes of rhythmic chirping increasing by leaps and bounds. As the excitement in her mind died down, she noticed that the birds continued to keep their distance, and the pegasus felt a twinge of sadness for her companion.

Did Mahara have friends back home, or was she as alone there as she is in Equestria? Well... Maybe not

so alone anymore.

Fluttershy closed her eyes again with a feeling of euphoria, burying her face in the side of Mahara's neck, admiring the softness of her coat.

"Before we feed the animals..." Mahara met her curious eyes, the pegasus lightly furrowing her brow. "I um... Not that it's a problem or anything, you're very beautiful!"

The red mare giggled and nosed into the warmth of her ear. Fluttershy continued to feel flush with bashfulness.

"Sorry. I was wondering... You don't have a cutie mark...Is that common where you're from?" Those emerald eyes began to drift to the horizon, searching the soft glow for an answer. "I'm... I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked you that..."

"No, it's alright. They say that a cutie mark is a symbol of something that you excel at above all things, so... I guess there just isn't anything which makes me special."

Fluttershy's concern was amplified by this response, pouting her lips slightly.

"Now that can't be true, you're um..." She felt herself blushing again, suddenly feeling silly for being embarrassed in the presence of somepony who obviously cared about what she had to say.

"You're very special... Well, I think you're very special... There has to be something you do that makes you unique." The red mare shrugged, grinning. "It's never too late, you know. You might get it at any moment for doing something just right!"

"Maybe," she mused. "That would be nice."

"Pinkie would probably throw you a Cutenote the second she found out about you getting it. Actually, she would probably know as soon as it happened." Mahara raised a brow. "She's got a gift, that's really all I can say. Oh..."

Angel peered out of the doorway at the pair, then, hesitantly, hopped right up to Mahara and held out his paw.

"Angel," The pegasus began to inquire, "What are you...?"

For several tense moments, Mahara stared intensely at the rabbit, as if having a silent conversation, then lifted her hoof to his outstretched foreleg. Fluttershy watched in silence as they shook on some unspoken agreement. Afterwards, Angel hopped around to the pegasus and curled up beside her.

"I guess... He had to accept me on his own terms. He probably understands now that I'm not going to hurt you."

Fluttershy cocked one brow, raising the other, glancing from Mahara to Angel and then back again.

"Is... Is there something you're not telling me?"

A few uncomfortable seconds passed before Mahara shook her head.

"Nothing of consequence, anyway." Fluttershy leaned closer, wordlessly pressing for an explanation. "I'll explain all my quirks and secrets in good time. For the moment, you'll just have to take my word for it."

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Breakfast, both for the animals and the pegasus, passed uneventfully, Mahara yet again declining any solid food. The birds and bunnies continued to avoid Mahara as well, Angel being the only exception since the mysterious truce. He kept a close watch over the red mare, of course, but didn't seem to mind her presence or flee from her as he once had. Despite the strangeness of the sudden turn of events, Fluttershy was more or less pleased that Angel wasn't vanishing for long stretches of time without warning. Also pleasing was Mahara's willingness to accompany Fluttershy into Ponyville for a few hours before the party. Rarity may have been busy with orders, and Pinky would likely be busy preparing for the party, but she could at least introduce Mahara to Applejack, Rainbow Dash and Twilight.

A beautiful summer morning had matured into another perfect summer afternoon. The low hum of insects saturated a passing breeze, complimenting the rolling sea of leaves and the not so distant calls of countless birds. Fluttershy found herself distracted by several pegasi hovering around a single cloud, repeatedly bucking it without the desired effect. Mahara brought her back to reality with a half heard question, plodding along slowly beside her, worryingly pale compared to her vibrant appearance not more than a few hours ago. In the interest of making a good first impression, the red mare had bound the remains of her wings under bandages. The sight made Fluttershy rather sad, but she supposed it was a good idea.

"I'm sorry, my mind was wandering. Could you repeat that?"

"I said I hope Applebloom is doing better. I wouldn't want anything bad to happen to her."

Fluttershy's thoughts snapped back to the bite marks on the filly's neck, unable to shake the image of Mahara sneaking up on Applebloom and sinking her teeth into the filly's artery. She was sure that it wasn't Mahara herself, but the idea of another, smaller pony following without her knowing wasn't out of the question.

"Oh, I'm sure she's fine." Fluttershy managed a smile as she spoke, still on edge about the whole thing. "Applejack and Big Macintosh probably kept a close eye on her."

"Alright, that's good. Is there anything I should know about your other friends before I meet them?"

The pegasus considered that for a moment, resting in the shade of a tree, for which Mahara seemed especially grateful.

"Better question," Mahara stated. "Should we let any of them know that we're-"

"No!" Fluttershy nearly clasped her hooves over her muzzle after the outburst, even if her voice had barely risen above a whisper. "Sorry... I mean, if you want to, um... I wouldn't mind telling anypony..."

"Having second thoughts?" The red mare asked with a grin.

"It's not that... It would just be so sudden. I would like to wait a little while... If um, if that's okay with you." The red mare nodded, following it with a little kiss on the cheek.

"Um..." Fluttershy did her best to collect herself. "Okay, the only pony I can really think to warn you about would be Pinkie, but you already met her. She's just... She's a little different, but a good friend all the same. Oh, and she likes pranks. You should... Um... I mean, be ready for anything, I guess."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Sufficiently rested and satisfied with a few mouthfuls of granola, Fluttershy emerged from the cool shelter of foliage and returned to the road, Ponyville only a few minutes trot from where she had decided to take a break. Mahara seemed a bit less eager to continue, practically wilting in direct sunlight, what little color she had regained from her time in the shade immediately washing out of her. The pegasus watched with concern, but Mahara managed a comforting smile and pressed on.

"I heard that there's something strange going on with the clouds," Fluttershy heard somepony say, just a few steps ahead of her around the outskirts of town.

She did her best, and failed, at attempting not to eavesdrop.

"The weather team is looking into it, says there's nothing to worry about, but still... How bizarre."

"You know Rainbow Dash. The lot of them are probably just slacking off again." The pair paused to nod in greeting to Fluttershy, then to stare at Mahara.

Their voices lowered considerably as the subject of conversation shifted, watching the pale red mare as she passed. "Must be the newcomer Pinkie is throwing that party for..."

"Are those bandages, you think?"

A pattern quickly emerged as Fluttershy led Mahara further into town. The majority of ponies that noticed her stopped what they were doing, either pausing mid conversation or setting aside whatever task they happened to be performing to silently watch or quietly chatter about the strange new mare accompanying the pegasus. Fluttershy was, at the very least, relieved that ponies weren't retreating into their homes and locking their doors as the red mare drew nearer.

But then, she asked herself, how often had Zecora ventured into town before ponies had begun to avoid her on sight?

Mahara didn't seem all that put off by being an object of curiosity, smiling here and nodding there as many eyes regarded her with uncertainty.

Not far from the library, Fluttershy decided a bit of pre-introduction briefing couldn't hurt.

"Up ahead is where Twilight has been living since transferring from Canterlot to study friendship. She's um... Very formal. At least at first. You seem to be too, though, so I think that you'll get along with her just fine."

Mahara nodded silently as they approached the door. Spike beat them to the punch.

"Hey there Fluttershy! Twilight isn't in right now, she's over at the doctor's office with..." The dragon trailed off as he noticed Mahara standing just behind Fluttershy, trying her best to stay out of the sunlight.

His eyes quickly brightened.

"Well hey there! Now I understand why Pinkie was going to throw a welcoming party! But... It's a get-well party as well as a welcoming party now, I guess." Suddenly forlorn, he added, "Was it supposed to be a surprise? I blew the surprise, didn't I?"

Mahara took a few steps closer to the doorway, looking very pleased to be completely in the shade. The prospect of a get-well party was now Fluttershy's primary concern, however.

"Did somepony get hurt?" A dreadful epiphany struck her. "It isn't Applebloom is it?"

Spike gave a slow nod, looking uncomfortable at the mention of her name.

"Oh no..." Fluttershy crossed her forelegs, worry on her brow. "How bad is she? She looked fine yesterday..."

"Well, doctors say she'll be alright in a day or two but..." Spike glanced down at the floor, then back up at the pegasus. "She lost a lot of blood between what happened last night and the night before. I heard that Applejack had to give her a transfusion really early this morning just to keep her stable. Scootaloo got attacked by the same creature, but she didn't lose nearly as much blood as Applebloom..."

Fluttershy looked back to Mahara, but the red mare appeared to be deep in thought.

"Weird thing about it is," Spike continued, "from what I've been hearing, Scootaloo is really shaken up by the whole thing, but Applebloom... Well it almost sounded like she was in a trance. She apparently kept saying that she would see her new friend again soon. Poor girl must be delirious."

"Goodness... Um, Mahara, if it's okay with you, I'd like to head right over to the doctor's office. I know Applebloom is safe for now but I should at least be there to make sure everyone else is okay." Mahara's gaze was now fixed on the door of the library, however.

Or, more specifically, what little she could see inside the library. Spike regarded her with suspicion, backing up a few steps. The timid pegasus looked into the library herself, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary. The only thing straight ahead of the red mare seemed to be one of Twilight Sparkle's reading tables, a lone, closed book resting on its surface.

"Mahara?" Fluttershy passed into the red mare's field of view, which seemed to bring her back to attention.

"Yes, sorry. I was elsewhere." She grinned down at Spike, giving a slow, graceful bow, still gazing deep into the library behind him. "It's been a pleasure."

"Y-yeah..." With each passing moment, Spike looked increasingly uncomfortable. "I'll see you around I guess...?"

Without a moment's hesitation, the dragon slipped into the library and shut the door behind him.

"Mahara, are you feeling alright?" Fluttershy arched a brow as she gave the red mare a look of concern. "I um... I didn't want to say anything on the way here but..."

The pegasus leaned a bit closer, surprised to see that the color was practically flowing back into Mahara's flesh and coat the longer she remained out of direct sunlight.

"I have a skin condition," she quickly stated, glancing down at the ground and shuffling a hoof. "I should have mentioned. I'm a bit light sensitive. It's nothing to worry about though." She gave a smile that the pegasus felt looked half hearted. "Really. Whenever you're ready."

"Oh... Um, okay."

A skin condition didn't quite explain the vacant look she had during the majority of the interaction with Spike, but then again, she may have just been thinking about Applebloom.

When the pegasus emerged from the shade of the library, she turned her attention back to her companion, watching closely as Mahara reluctantly left the sanctuary of foliage. The effect was practically

immediate, color receding from her flesh the moment it felt the radiance of the sun, as if trying to cling to the shade, migrating to her underside while the rest of her became a sickly pale by comparison. For several steps, Mahara faltered, looking as though she might collapse. After she had heaved a deep breath, however, she motioned that she was ready to continue.

Unlike the day prior, where there had only been Applejack and Rainbow Dash milling around in front of the doctor's office, a small crowd of ponies now congregated outside the humble clinic. Fluttershy wondered just how long they had all been there. It was still relatively early, so perhaps word was only just getting around. Mahara's presence caused a chain reaction, a shockwave of turning heads that immediately quieted the noisy gathering. All eyes fell on the red mare, and Fluttershy felt as though she were a ghost beside her companion. The seconds passed with uncomfortable slowness until chatter gradually resumed, only a select few ponies still admiring or inspecting the novelty that was Mahara.

Getting through the crowd was easy enough. Everypony was more than happy to move aside for Fluttershy, and by extension, Mahara, who clung to Fluttershy like a shadow.

"I forgot to mention," the red mare whispered just shy of the door. "I'm not all that fond of crowds."

"I know the feeling... These are um... They're good ponies. Just try not to think about it." The pegasus held the door open, but Mahara stood fixed to the spot, looking around anxiously. "Aren't you... Um, you don't want to come inside?"

"I don't like entering new places without permission."

"Oh..." Fluttershy glanced into the doctor's office, then back to Mahara. "Well, I'm sure you're welcome here. I think it's considered a public place."

"You're sure?"

"I'm um..." Fluttershy grinned just a bit at the strangeness of the situation.

The red mare was clearly uncomfortable outside, just about prancing in place as she waited for admittance into a building that was open to everypony in town.

"Yes, I'm sure. Now come inside. Um... Please?"

Without a moment further, Mahara slipped passed the pegasus and exhaled a deep sigh of relief.

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Applejack had lost blood before. A pony doesn't buck apple trees for as many seasons as she had without getting a few nasty cuts or gouges in the process. Even so, she still felt light headed from the transfer, lying in the bed next to Applebloom's, keeping constant watch over the little filly for fear that the whole world might just try to cave in on her. Rainbow Dash stood nearby, but not as near as the blond maned mare would have liked. The blue pegasus glanced her way, brow knitted with a mixture of sad understanding and repressed longing, but they both had appearances to keep, especially with all of their friends present.

Well, all of their friends, except Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie.

On a moment's notice, that changed as well. Behind the curtain, she could hear the timid pegasus speaking with another pony, and then to Twilight and Rarity. Everything felt a little fuzzy as she strained to hear them. Not that it would matter, because it seemed that gibberish was the topic of conversation.

"Yes, she shoe intone." Fluttershy's voice dropped to near inaudibility, clearly intending her next statement for the unicorns' ears only. "Sheesh a lotto sly though."

Twilight and Rarity giggled, but their greetings came across as little more than mumbles as they moved farther from the curtain.

With a groan, Applejack gave up on trying to eavesdrop, letting her head flop back against the pillow. Applebloom groaned as well, the first noise she had made in hours, and began to squirm, inching toward the edge of the bed. Nurse Tenderheart took notice and put a hoof to Applebloom's shoulder, trying to keep her still. The others approached the curtain, several sets of hoofsteps signaling their proximity. It became easier to listen the closer they got.

"Well my dear, you certainly have an interesting choice in hairstyle." Rarity's voice was unmistakable. "I believe that look was popular in Manehattan not so long ago."

"I wouldn't know. I'm afraid I've never been there." This was the voice of a stranger, her words spoken softly and calmly, but the confidence behind them was evident. "Ponyville seems nice so far, though."

"Oh yes, it's such a quaint little town, isn't it?"

Dash glanced back at Applejack, then took a few steps closer to the curtain, peering through a divide at the group of ponies on the other side. Before she had a chance to retreat, the curtains emitted a soft glow and spread around their advance, and Rainbow Dash found herself on a collision course with four slowly trotting ponies. Twilight was the one to make impact, the blue pegasus emitting a soft 'oof' as the purple unicorn plowed right into Dash's side. Rarity and Fluttershy looked on with concern, though Rarity's concern melted away as she began to giggle as politely as she could.

In the rear of the group was a pony that Applejack couldn't put a name to, which made a lot more sense when she realized that she had never met the red mare before. They made eye contact for a fleeting second, a brief flash of brilliant green, before the red pony was looking elsewhere, uninterested in the incident unfolding before her, or any of the other ponies in the room. That is, until her attention centered on Applebloom.

Cautiously taking her eyes off the stranger, Applejack directed her gaze toward her younger sister to find that the filly was now trembling violently. Applebloom fought viciously against the nurse at her side, one hoof outstretched toward the red mare at the edge of the curtain. She was babbling something unintelligible, almost moaning.

"Applebloom!" The orange mare rolled over slowly, her head swimming as she got to her hooves. The floor felt mushy, undulating under her. "What's got into you?! Calm yerself down!"

Big Macintosh nearly ripped the curtains off their rings as he charged into the enclosure, eyes wide with panic. "What in Celestia's name-?!"

"She's doin' it again Mac! Get Redheart in here!"

"The nurse's right behind me sis!" The red stallion crowded in next to Applejack, putting a hoof to the filly's shoulder, trying to hold her down against the bed.

Applejack searched the room for any sign of the nurse's approach, her vision blurred by the tears welling up in her eyes, but the expression of concern shared by her friends was obvious even through the emotional haze. She didn't have to look to know that Rainbow Dash was right at her side, trying her best to calm the frenzied Applebloom. The red mare, however, stood out like a rotten apple. She retained her

calm demeanor, watching silently as the filly convulsed. Applejack felt revulsion growing in the pit of her stomach before Nurse Redheart's arrival distracted her.

A syringe glimmered in the medical mare's mouth, and with a precision jab, she injected a clear fluid into Applebloom's neck. It must have been a tranquilizer judging by the way the fight left the filly almost immediately. Applejack, on the other hoof, had completely overcome the drawbacks of the transfusion, riding a wave of adrenaline from the sudden shock of Applebloom's fit. She could feel her hairs standing on end, every sound coming in sharp and clear.

"Oh my..." Fluttershy whispered somewhere in the distance.

Twilight shared the sentiment. "I think... Maybe we should give them a little space."

Applejack refused to take her eyes off of Applebloom, though her gaze occasionally drifted to Rainbow Dash for support, feeling relieved just to know that she was there. Behind her, she could hear the other ponies doing their best to ease the tension in the room now that the filly had fallen into much gentler spasms, breathlessly mouthing something in the red mare's direction.

"We can visit my boutique if you like. My most recent clients canceled their order at the last minute, so I've found myself with quite a bit of free time."

Even at a time like this, all that frou-frou pony can think 'bout is fashion.

"Oh! You know, I bet you could use a new dress! You never know when you might need a dress for a... Special occasion?"

Oh for heaven's sake...

"She already knows about the surprise party... I um... I warned her in advance."

"Oh. Well, in that case, I'd just love to make you a dress for the party. Think of it as a welcoming gift."

"Rainbow Dash," Twilight called out. Applejack felt her heart sink as she braced for the following words. "Are you coming? We should probably give the Apple family some time to themselves."

The blue pegasus looked up from Applebloom, then back down at Applejack.

"I'm sorry," Dash whispered as tenderly as she could. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Big Macintosh looked away in sympathetic discomfort as Applejack gave a subtle nod. "Do what you gotta do, sugarcube," whispered the orange mare. "Ah'm a big girl, Ah'll be alright..."

"Yeah, you're right." The blue pegasus responded. "I could go for stretching my legs anyway."

Doing her best to hide her true feelings, Rainbow Dash gracefully floated into the air, her ears brushing the ceiling as she carried herself over the bed and landed with the others. Applejack watched forlornly out of the corner of her eye.

"I just remembered..." The timid yellow pegasus faltered, glancing around the room. "What I mean is; Spike told Mahara and I that Scootaloo had been bitten as well."

Mahara, Applejack realized, must be the name of the red pony that arrived with Fluttershy. This was as good an introduction as any, and the orange mare was already harboring feelings of resentment against the newcomer. It would have to wait for another time, though, as the group was already making their way

for the exit.

“Oh, that little pipsqueak went home hours ago.” Dash forced a grin, trying to maintain her composure. “She’ll probably be fine as long as she stays indoors, which shouldn’t be a problem after last night.”

The blue pegasus glanced back at the filly, and then her older sister, mouthing the words ‘*Seeya later.*’

“She seemed awfully mad at Applebloom about the whole thing, actually.” Twilight spoke in her usual, matter-of-fact way. “Scootaloo kept shooting her dirty looks and grumbling.”

They were getting farther away, well out of sight now and nearly to the door.

“Did um... Did either of them describe the creature that attacked them?”

Twilight responded to Fluttershy before Dash could get a word in. “Apparently, they both gave the same description as Applebloom had given the day before. Considering the strange happenings around Ponyville in the past few days, I think it’s safe to say we should organize a town meeting and inform everypony that there might be cause for alarm.”

“Yeah,” Dash muttered before being muffled by the closing of the front door. “What she said...”

V ^ ^ V

“Soooo...” Rarity began, looking through the lengths of fabric at hoof, levitating them to Mahara’s side to compare them with the color of her coat.

The red mare had insisted on keeping herself wrapped with bandages, which Rarity understood completely. They were doing a fantastic job keeping her middle smooth and shapely, which would make fitting for the dress that much easier.

Maybe Fluttershy will start doing this as well, since she doesn’t seem to care about trying to slim down. She should really put more thought into her appearance, at least.

Sweetie Belle was in her room doing her homework, which meant that Rarity need not worry that the young unicorn would cause some sort of fabric related mishap.

The sooner that filly realizes that her silk is better sung than sewn, the less material I’ll have to scrap.

Rainbow Dash stood by the window, staring off into the distance, which the unicorn fashionista found to be completely typical of the blue pegasus.

A tomboy through and through. I can never tell what’s on her mind...

Twilight Sparkle attempted to read the fashion magazines spread out on the table before her, but appeared incapable of grasping the theories of style or the articles on the latest fashions that filled the pages.

The poor dear.

Fluttershy sat on a nearby couch, lightly nuzzling Opalescence, who soaked up the attention like a sponge. The couch groaned softly under the tubby pegasus every time she shifted her weight, which brought on a feeling of mild disgust in Rarity whenever it reached her ears. Seemingly aware of this, Fluttershy poured more attention onto the spoiled feline, doing her best to distract herself from what Rarity

hoped was guilt.

I hope I'm not being resentful, Rarity mused to herself. I've tried to help her. Celestia knows how I've tried, but she just won't put forth the effort. And she knows very well that the full figured look hasn't been in for decades. Perhaps she just doesn't care. Then again, she hated being a model, maybe she's trying to hide from fame behind the extra weight. Or maybe this is a shot at me for pushing her into being a model in the first place! Oh but she wouldn't hold a grudge, would she?

Rarity bit her lower lip, looking between sheets of black and white silk, both from the surplus caused by the canceled order. A smile found its way to her lips as they escaped her teeth.

"Thank you again," the red mare said sweetly. "If I had a way of paying you I certainly would."

"Oh, not at all my dear! This will practically pay for itself. What better way is there to advertise my dresses than by having ponies wear them?"

Mahara returned Rarity's smile, lightly tapping the floor with a forehoof. "Still, thank you all the same."

"Any friend of Fluttershy's is a friend of mine." She looked over to the timid pegasus and smiled as sincerely as she could.

Still looking rather uncomfortable, Fluttershy tried her best to do the same.

Rarity flatly added, in Fluttershy's direction, "And I suppose I should let out your dress from the Gala sometime as well..."

The yellow pegasus immediately cast her gaze to the floor, but when Rarity returned her attention to Mahara, she found the red mare's eyes had widened as though she were startled.

"Is something bothering you?"

Mahara looked, presumably, at Fluttershy, and then back to Rarity, lowering her brow slightly. "No, it's nothing."

"So what's up with your name? It sounds kinda... Zebraish." Rainbow Dash had decided to join the conversation at last.

In unison, both unicorns and the normally timid pegasus shouted, or in Fluttershy's case, sternly said, "Dash!"

To the surprise of everypony present, Mahara began to laugh. Rainbow Dash joined her, Fluttershy giggling as quietly as she could, while Rarity and Twilight exchanged looks of confusion.

"I'm not from the land of the Zebra, I'm sorry to say. My name is just very..." She scanned the room, trying to find the word she was looking for. "Traditional, I guess. Maybe old fashioned is the better phrase."

Rainbow Dash seemed to think about that for a moment. Rarity couldn't find anything wrong with the name. Mahara sounded very exotic, rolling off the lips and tongue like some sort of foreign gem or delicacy. And then there were her eyes. The pale unicorn had almost tried to use her gem finding spell just to make sure the emerald pools of her irises weren't actually real emeralds. Mahara had pupils like Opalescence on top of that, or maybe they were more like Spike's. Rainbow Dash beat her to it.

"Are your eyes traditional too?" The blue pegasus smugly intoned, smirking afterwards.

"My eyes..." Mahara began, then seemed to lose herself in thought, a vacant stare coming over her.

Twilight Sparkle, having given up on the fashion magazines entirely, approached Rarity and Mahara with a hint of curiosity in her demeanor. Only later would Rarity realize that it had been suspicion.

"Your eyes are very unique, I have to say. I don't think there are any documented instances of ponies with eyes like yours in any of the books I've read; not even a mention in medical journals or spellbooks. But here you are, a pony unlike any other in the written history of Equestria."

Mahara had long since come back to reality, looking at Twilight in a way that made Rarity feel a twinge of discomfort, somewhere between unease and anxiety.

"I'm sure you've heard the rumors by now. Fluttershy was at the doctor's office yesterday, and if she didn't tell you, then surely you heard it while passing through town."

"I'm afraid I'm at a loss." The red mare glanced to Fluttershy, but Rarity couldn't quite place her expression. "What point are you trying to make?"

"For the moment, I have no point to make. I just find it interesting that suddenly, not one, but two ponies appear in Ponyville that have eyes like yours." Twilight had come within a few noses of Mahara now, but the red mare held her ground. "Admittedly, the filly that attacked Applebloom twice and Scootaloo only once has yet to be seen by anypony other than those two girls, so there isn't any solid proof that they're telling the truth. But last night, or maybe it was early this morning, the strangest thing happened to me."

Mahara's eyes narrowed by a hair, her lips pressed tightly together. Twilight Sparkle paced a few steps parallel to the red mare, and Rarity found herself wordlessly dividing her attention between them. Rainbow Dash and Fluttershy kept their distance, watching with silent apprehension.

The inquisition continued as the purple unicorn directed her next question to the blue pegasus.

"Rainbow Dash, where did you go after leaving me at the library last night?"

"Me? Uh... I went right back to Applejack and Big Macintosh. They had just arrived at the clinic with Applebloom and Scootaloo when they sent me over to get you."

"And you never left them after that, until we decided to come here with Rarity?"

Sheepishly, Rarity interjected. "Dash, what were you doing with Applejack and Big Macintosh that late at night, exactly?"

Twilight shot her a glare that Rarity felt might turn her to stone. Rainbow Dash heaved a quiet sigh, the slightest grin gracing her lips.

"I stayed with them all night," the blue pegasus responded. "What's your deal anyway? Why all these questions?"

"Because you visited me a second time that night, Rainbow Dash. Only I don't think it was you. It looked like you, and it sounded like you, but there was something very peculiar about the pegasus on my doorstep." Twilight took another step toward Mahara, Rarity backing slowly away from them both. "The Rainbow Dash I know would have just barged right in and started rifling through my bookshelves if she thought it would help her friends. The Rainbow Dash that visited me a second time last night wanted permission to enter the library. She didn't state that expressly, but I could tell from the start that she wanted me to let her in, and more importantly, that she couldn't enter until I had done so."

Rainbow Dash widened her eyes a bit, opening her mouth to say something, silenced as Twilight raised a hoof in her direction. Fluttershy looked as though she wanted to run, or to hide, probably both. Sweetie Belle briefly peered into the room to see what all the fuss was about, then disappeared again just as quickly. Mahara was a statue, never once taking her eyes off of Twilight.

"Rarity welcomed us all into her boutique, which unfortunately voided the chance for me to test my theory, but I overheard your conversation outside the doctor's office. If Fluttershy hadn't invited you inside, I'm willing to wager that you would have remained at the front door. There's polite, and then there's just absurd."

"You've called my phobia of new places to attention." Her words were nearly hissed. "I'm sure your mentor must be so proud."

"I should hope so, but now, I return to the point I have yet to make. You see, the bizarre politeness of this other Rainbow Dash wasn't the only thing that struck me as off. Would you like to know what that other thing was, Mahara?"

"Please, by all means," Mahara's voice dropped to a near whisper. "Tell me."

"It was her eyes. Rainbow Dash has had magenta eyes for as long as I've known her."

"Maroon," Rarity corrected, only to receive another stony glare.

"Rainbow Dash has had maroon eyes for as long as I've known her. She had maroon eyes when she visited me the first time, but the second time..."

A visible shudder passed through the red mare, her bandages coming to life as something writhed beneath them, settling into complete stillness again only moments later.

"The second time she visited me, her eyes were green. Not just green, but emerald green. That sounds very familiar, doesn't it?"

Twilight Sparkle had begun a slow orbit, circling Mahara, who seemed to be watching her out of the corners of her eyes.

The purple unicorn edged closer, nearly pressing her forehead against Mahara's. "You have nothing to say?"

"You are making me feel very unwelcome." The red mare seemed to loosen up, tilting her head to the side. "If you didn't want me to come here with your circle of friends, you could have told me so back at the doctor's office."

"The Apple family has been through enough over the last two days, and I didn't want to subject them to this as well."

"But mocking me for my shortcomings and equating me with whatever oddities you've been experiencing recently is perfectly alright?"

Twilight Sparkle seemed, for the first time since beginning her questioning spree, to be at a loss for words. Mahara smirked, then turned toward the door.

"Clearly my presence offends you. You have my sincerest apologies, and I'll be leaving presently." She glanced back at Twilight, narrowing her eyes. "But I have no intention of leaving the party being held in my name, so I ask that you try and curb your... Assumptive urges... Until the party has ended."

The purple unicorn's face flushed, a shade of embarrassment Rarity had very rarely seen in Twilight Sparkle. "No, you know what?" She glared at Mahara, practically growling her words. "You stay right here. I'll be the one to leave since apparently I'm the one making an ass of myself. I'll see you three later at *Applebloom's get-well party.*"

Both Rarity and Fluttershy gasped while Rainbow Dash did her best to stifle a giggle. Without a word further, Twilight Sparkle stormed out of Carousel Boutique and into the afternoon haze.

Unable to control herself anymore, the blue pegasus began to laugh hysterically. "Did you hear that?! I don't think I've ever heard her swear before!"

"Oh my... I guess um... I guess she didn't get along with you as well as I thought she would, Mahara..." Blushing a bit herself, Fluttershy added, "I should have said something... That was so rude of her..."

"The only harm done was to my pride," the red mare mused as she crossed the room. "No need to worry."

Realizing she had dropped the lengths of silk some time ago, Rarity levitated the fabrics and set them on her sewing machine. "Well, this has been something of a bust; there isn't nearly enough time left before the party as I'll need to make you a proper dress. I'm so, so very sorry, my dear, both for the lack of attire and for Twilight Sparkle's behavior."

"Someone once told me that it's better to know a pony for their true feelings than it is to only know a façade." She smiled, seating herself beside Fluttershy, Opalescence immediately vacating the pegasus. "I should be thanking her for showing me how she really feels."

"So hey..." Rainbow Dash cautiously began, "Does this mean we can all swear whenever we feel like it now or...?"

While Mahara grinned, Fluttershy and Rarity shouted "Dash!"

V ^ ^ V

"Okie-Dokie-Loki, I thiiiink that's everything!"

Pinkie Pie stood in the center of a fully, brightly decorated Sugarcube Corner, slowly surveying the room to make sure that every detail was absolutely perfect. A few ponies had already begun milling around the room, but the party couldn't start until Fluttershy's new friend had arrived. Applebloom would arrive at any moment with Applejack, though Big Macintosh had declined the invitation in favor of going back home to rest. The thought made her sad, so she went over the itinerary again to distract herself.

Streamers, check! Balloons, double check! Drinks, triple check! Baked goodies, so many checks!

Pinkie bounced in place, glancing from the open door to the steadily increasing number of guests. Seeing as it was a surprise party, the other guests were supposed to arrive before the guest of honor, otherwise they might accidentally spoil the surprise. Once everypony was present, she would release a pink balloon; the signal for Rarity, Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash to bring the newcomer over. Fluttershy had been intentionally kept in the dark just in case she tried to spoil the surprise.

What a silly pegasus; scared of heights, scared of surprises, probably even scared of her own shadow! Oh well, it takes all kind of ponies to make things fun. There's Applejack. Applebloom looks awfully silly. I hope the drugs they gave her wear off soon. I wouldn't want her to miss her own get-well party. Aaaaand I think that's everyone I invited! Let me just...

The pink pony grabbed a pink balloon from the floating bundle by the ribbon and dragged it outside with her teeth.

They should still be at Carousel Boutique. I'm sure Rainbow Dash will be able to spot this balloon from there. Oh, there's Twilight. Wait a minute!

"Twilight?!" Free from her mouth, the balloon began to drift skyward, halted as Pinkie frantically fumbled the plastic ribbon back under her control. "You're supposed to be with the others and that new girl!"

"The others are still with that *new girl*," Twilight coldly replied, "So they should be along shortly. I'm here to visit Applebloom."

"Oh! Okie-Dokie-" Twilight Sparkle had vanished through the doorway before she could finish. "Loki..."

I wonder what's got her so flunk flustered. Oh well, I just hope she doesn't spread it around. Maybe she'll cheer up once the party starts! Now where was I?

Pinkie wiggled her foreleg until the ribbon unwound itself, watching with a wide grin as it lazily floated into the air.

There it goes... It's game time now! Oh... Hey, that's weird. My chest feels fluttery, and my neck is itchy! It's that new combo again! I wonder what it means! There go my ears too! Is this part of the combo? No... No I guess somepony is just going to need a bath. Which is going to happen first though? I guess I'll just have to wait and see!

The pink mare cheerfully bounced through the doorway, sweeping the door closed with a hind hoof. Mrs. Cake went around turning off the lights and closing the curtains as Pinkie took up her hiding place beside the doorway, careful not to be in the path of the door when it opened. The absence of any sort of warning in the form of her Pinkie Sense allowed her to relax; there would be no door related mishaps. She leaned toward a nearby window, peering out from behind the curtain and into the street.

With so many ponies packed in here, Ponyville must seem like a ghost town! There's barely anyone out there now. Oh! Oh, there they are! And this is Sugarcube corner, miss pony I don't know your name yet. Why don't you come inside? They have all kinds of tasty surprises in there! Come on, just a little closer... Almost here... Showtime!

Rearing up, grinning ear to ear, Pinkie was ready to surprise the cutie mark off the guest of honor, only, the first pony through the door wasn't the guest of honor; it was Rainbow Dash. And then Rarity. And then Fluttershy, who turned and looked back out onto the street.

"Oh!" The timid pegasus began to blush. "I um... Sorry, I forgot. You can come in, everyone is welcome here."

Fluttershy stood aside, and the barely familiar red mare poked her head into the dimly lit interior of Sugarcube Corner, her eyes practically glowing. None of that mattered, of course, because the guest of honor didn't even notice Pinkie standing on her hind legs not more than a foreleg's reach away. The timid yellow pegasus cringed preemptively.

"SURPRIISE!" shouted everypony at once as the lights flashed to full brightness, though Pinkie was the loudest, regardless of her proximity.

Those green eyes got very wide very fast, the red mare crouching down, back arched almost like a cat, her back squirming violently under tightly wrapped bandages for several brief moments. Once those

moments passed, though, she straightened back up, laughing.

"Okay yeah," the red mare crooned. "I *definitely* wasn't expecting *that*. Hi, uh... Everypony?"

Pinkie's smile suddenly faded as she was stuck with a revelation. She had never even told the red mare her name. Introductions were clearly in order.

"Hiiii! I'm Pinkie Pie but don't think you know that because I never said it earlier when we met because I was all, *I gotta go bye bye!*" The pink mare paused only for a deep inhale while the guest of honor stood speechless. "And I really wanted to invite you to this party because you're new here but I thought it would be even better if it was a surprise party and now you're here and we can have fun! Woo-hoo!"

"I uh... Thanks! Thank you!"

"Don't even think of mentioning it! Well it's too late I guess but don't mention it again, it's my pleasure! What's your name though? I told you my name already!"

"You most certainly did!" The red mare bowed her head in a respectful nod. "You may call me Mahara; pleased to make your acquaintance."

Upon hearing the name of her guest, Pinkie immediately fell silent. Evidently feeling awkward about the pause, Mahara donned the widest grin she could.

"Hey, that sounds like a zebra name!" Rainbow Dash did her best to stop herself from laughing behind the red mare. "Are you a zebra? You don't look like a zebra!"

With that, Dash fell into another fit of laughter. Pinkie Pie smiled, pleased with Rainbow Dash's reaction, even if she didn't understand what was so funny about the question.

"This isn't the first time I've heard that today," the red mare explained, grinning as she glanced back at the hysterical pegasus, then to Rarity and Fluttershy, both of whom seemed to be in high spirits. "But no, I'm sorry to say that I'm not a zebra."

"Well that's okay! I've only met one zebra before anyway. Huh..."

The pink mare leaned closer, her curly mop of a mane bobbing. Mahara attempted to back up a bit when she realized Pinkie Pie was investigating her bandages.

"What's with all the wrapping? Did you wrap yourself up like a gift? Or did you get hurt or something?" Pinkie's eyes widened dramatically as she gasped. "Oh no, that would be so terrible! Now the party has to be extra fun because it's a welcoming party *and* two get well parties all at once!"

"It's nothing like that," Fluttershy interjected, glancing down at the floor and shrinking back no sooner than she had finished speaking. "I mean, Mahara isn't injured. It's um..."

"It's a long story and certainly not one fit for such a wonderful party." Mahara regained what little ground she had lost upon Pinkie's inspection. "I'll tell you all later if you like, but as Fluttershy already knows, it's a bit graphic..."

"Perhaps later," The pale unicorn replied as she moved away from the doorway. "Though I'll ask you to spare me the more worrying details if it's, as you say, *graphic*."

"Of course," said Mahara, with a polite smile.

Rainbow Dash had long since recovered from her giggle fit, wiping a few tears from her eyes and departing from Mahara. Pinkie watched as the blue pegasus cut straight through the party, her sights apparently set on Applejack and her younger sister. Rarity and Fluttershy had begun to idly chat about what had happened to Applebloom and Scootaloo, and Rarity's relief over Sweetie Belle's safety. Mahara remained by the door, looking around the bustling room inquisitively.

"Okay, you let me know if you need aaaanything!" Pinkie had begun to bounce in place. "I'm gonna go make sure everyone's finding everything okay! Seeya later!"

Another perfect party! Everyone is laughing, and dancing, and eating the pastries I baked. Mmhmm! Hello Bonbon! Hello to you too! And you! Hiiii Ditz! Yes, this is a new punch recipe I picked up! There's just a teensy bit of whiskey in it! Apple whiskey! Applejack looks like she's doing better too, that's great! Wait, no, she's upset again. What is Twilight doing upsetting her with all this grumpy talk? I can't have this in my party, no ma'am!

Twilight had Applejack in one of the quieter corners of the room, both mares keeping their voices as low as they could.

"I know that I'm usually the one to try and see the good in these kinds of things, but I feel like I'm on the other side of it this time. Everypony really seems to like her, but the coincidences are just too big for me to overlook. Do we even know where she's been staying?" Twilight didn't even notice Pinkie Pie sneaking up on the two of them.

"Ah know how ya feel, Twi..." Applejack seemed to be more aware of Pinkie's presence, but didn't put much thought into it. "Ah don't think any a ya'll noticed it back at tha clinic, but that mare... Meraha? Somethin bout her just ain't right. Ah can't put mah hoof on it, but Ah don't think Ah wanna get too friendly with her."

"Hey now, that isn't a nice thing to say about our new friend! Mahara is a nice girl from what I've seen so far. She's even helping Fluttershy with housework and stuff while she's staying there!"

Twilight Sparkle's attention snapped to the pink mare. "She's staying *where*?"

"At Fluttershy's cottage, silly! What did you think I meant?"

The purple unicorn narrowed her eyes at Pinkie, who playfully returned the gesture with a grin, but instead of having a staring contest, Twilight disappeared into the crowd of dancing ponies. Around the same time, Rainbow Dash emerged from the grooving masses with a pair of drinks. The pegasus started a friendly nod, then remembered the tray between her teeth a few moments too late. The plastic cups fell to the floor, spilling their contents. The blue pegasus looked more upset with the tray than herself.

Mmmnope! There go my ears again. Guess it isn't bath time for anypony just yet! I'll just clean this up with a napkin. There, all better!

"Sugarcube, wadda ya'll think of that new girl? Meha... Mehara? Ah feel like Ah ain't pronouncin' that right."

"Ma-ha-ra," replied Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash, though not quite in unison.

"Ma-ha-ra," repeated Applejack. "Anyway, she don't give ya any weird vibes er nothin'?"

"Besides the corny name, not really." Dash started to turn in the direction of the refreshments, and then paused. "Actually, she got Twilight to swear! How great is that?!"

Applejack grinned while Pinkie quietly expressed her amazement at the allegations of Twilight Sparkle profanity.

The blue pegasus continued after abandoning her plans to get replacement drinks. "Twilight went totally off the handle at her though. She says I visited her a second time last night, but you know how that egghead has an overactive imagination."

"Yeah, Ah hear that." Applejack turned to Pinkie, motioning out into the crowd. "Why don'tcha go make sure she ain't rainin' on nopony else's parade."

"Yessiree ma'am! Let me know if you need anything!"

Those two spend a whole lotta time together these days. I'm glad they're finally getting over all that silly competition! They can both be the iron pony! Or maybe they'll take turns. Oh well, they'll figure it out. Hello again! Glad you like the punch! Not too much though, and I hope you're not planning on flying for a few hours! Yes Lyra! I sure did bake that cake myself! No, just a pinch of hot sauce for a little extra kick! It does go nicely with the fudge doesn't it? I just love this song, don't you? Oh, there's Mahara! Hi Mahara! What a silly pony, all wrapped up like a mummy. Maybe she really is a zebra and she's hiding her stripes! No that's silly, she'd have stripes everywhere, not just on her middle. She looks a little different though... When did she die her coat a lighter color? Oh, what is she looking at? Uh-oh! Twilight Sparkle is getting all grumpy with Fluttershy now! I hope I'm not too late!

The yellow pegasus was evidently trying to back up, but with her backside pressed to the wall, there simply wasn't anywhere for her to go but down, so she crouched, doing everything in her power to make herself as small as possible. Twilight would not be so easily avoided, however.

"And you're just letting her stay with you? Fluttershy, I know you like helping ponies, but you don't know anything about that mare! What if she tried to hurt you?"

"But um... She... She didn't hurt me, Twilight..." Her tiny voice faltered, trying her best to argue with the purple unicorn. "She's... She's really... Nice... I mean, I um... I like her... A lot... And um..."

"For all you know she could be dangerous! It's one thing to make friends with somepony but to just let them stay with you without even really getting to know them first?" Twilight's expression was all serious business, not at all fitting for a party. "You're all the way out by the Everfree Forest, what if something bad happens to you?"

"N-nothing bad is going to happen, Twilight! You'll just um... You'll just have to trust me... Okay? Um... Please?"

Pinkie glanced back to where Mahara had been standing, only to find several other ponies in her place, the red mare nowhere to be seen. Twilight gave a grumble of defeat and stormed right past Pinkie Pie, then abruptly backed up until they were face to face.

"Pinkie, I have a special favor to ask you."

Rarity had rejoined Fluttershy, a drink and a cupcake for herself, but apparently nothing for her friend. The pudgy yellow pegasus eyed the cupcake intensively. Twilight craned her head into Pinkie's field of vision to recapture her attention.

"This is serious, Pinkie Pie!"

"Jeeze Louise, you're the mayor of grouchville today! What kind of favor?"

"I know how much you *love* disguising yourself and spying on ponies. Well, I would like you to keep an eye on Fluttershy for me. Just to make sure she stays safe."

Pinkie raised a brow, jaw hanging partially open as she considered the request.

"Please? Pinkie, I wouldn't be asking you if I didn't think this was important."

"Weeeeell... Okay, but only for a day or two, okay? I'm sure Fluttershy wouldn't like it if she knew I was spying on her."

"That's all I ask. Thank you, Pinkie."

Twilight receded into the tipsy, laughing, whooping crowd of ponies, the music nearly inaudible over the ruckus of party goers.

Maaaaybe I should have tried the spiked punch on a smaller group first... Oh well, everypony is having a good time, so that's the most important thing! Oh no, Twilight's grumpiness is contagious after all! Fluttershy is upset now too! And so is Rarity! This won't do at all! Fluttershy? Hey, cheer up now, this is a party! No? Okay... Oh, here comes Rarity.

"This is as much your fault as it is hers, you know." Rarity's expression and tone came across as haughty, possibly because of her stance, with her head and nose held high.

"Whadda ya mean by that? I didn't say anything grumpy to Fluttershy!"

"She's... Pinkie, dear, she's practically a parade float. You and I both know that the metabolism of a pegasus is much more delicate than that of a unicorn or an earth pony, especially Fluttershy's. She has never used her wings as often as a typical pegasus, and she barely exercised *before* she went into that bout of post breakup depression. But bringing her pastries *to cheer her up* when she was just laying around for days on end?"

The pale unicorn sighed, shaking her head slowly. "It's as much my fault too, though. I should have said something sooner, before she could get this bad. What are we to do, Pinkie Pie? Seeing her like this breaks my heart."

"Rarity! Fluttershy isn't bad at all! She's also not a parade float, silly, she's a pegasus!" The pink mare fell silent as Rarity's frustration mounted. "What's a meta-balsam anyway?"

Rarity made a noise that amounted to a '*hmp*' and then disappeared into the crowd as well.

That's three friends who aren't having a good time... Oh nooooo am I coming down with the grumps too? Gotta stay positive... I'll make sure everyone is having a good- Ooof! That's okay, Berry Punch. Maybe you've had a little too much to drink though. Ditzzy Doo, don't try and fly insi- Please be more careful! Lyra! Bonbon! What are you- Ohmygosh don't do that here! That cake is for everypony, don't feed the whole thing to her! Hey, don't- Daisy! Lilly! Rose! Don't dance around on the table like that, you're going to- Oh no! Look at this mess! Yes Mister Cake, I know this is getting a little out of hoof, I'm very sorry!

"Yer **sorry**?" Applejack's voice, even if it dripped with intoxication, cut right through the noise of the party, everypony suddenly falling silent. "An' jus' what do ya have ta be **sorry** fer, huh?! Did ya'll do this ta mah lil Applebloom?!"

For a moment, Pinkie Pie thought the blond mare was addressing her, but then she spotted Mahara slowly backing away from Applejack and her younger sister, Rainbow Dash putting a hoof on Applejack's shoulder to try and stop her.

The pale red mare glanced around nervously, the crowd pulling away from her as she continued to retreat. "If apologizing to your sister for her misfortune is something you frown upon-

"Yer damn right Ah frown upon it! Ah don't want you comin' anywhere *near* Applebloom, understand?!"

"Leave her alone, sis..." With the party hushed, the red bowed filly was easily heard. "She didn't mean nothin' by it. She's my..."

Mahara shook her head frantically, a motion which did not go un-noticed by anypony, and certainly not Twilight Sparkle or Applejack.

"She's your friend, right Applebloom?" Twilight stepped forward, advancing with Applejack, but without the drunken swagger. "She's been your friend for the last two nights now, hasn't she?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Mahara quickly stated, trying to back her way toward the door.

"Twi didn' ask *you*." Applejack said with a snort, turning her attention back to Applebloom. "This tha same mare 's been bitin' ya?"

Pinkie held her breath for what felt like an eternity, Mahara staring intently at Applebloom, the little filly staring right back. Applebloom inhaled slowly, and was about to give an answer, but Fluttershy had apparently decided that things had gone too far.

"That's enough!" The yellow pegasus stood between Mahara and her accusers, glaring at the latter.

"This is no way to treat a pony! Mahara may be different, but she's not a bad mare! I know it may be hard for you to see that, and I know that bad things have been happening recently, but I can tell you that Mahara is not the one responsible for any of them!"

Pinkie quickly looked back to Mahara, only to find that she was now staring down at the floor, her expression a mixture of distance and sadness. Fluttershy turned in time to see it herself, a bit of sorrow softening her expression as her fury began to subside.

"I should go," the red mare stated, simply and softly.

"I'll be joining you," Fluttershy replied, shooting another angry look back at Twilight Sparkle and Applejack.

Only Applejack seemed to be ashamed of herself. Twilight scoffed, looking vacantly toward the window, while Applejack slowly turned and trotted toward Applebloom and Rainbow Dash. All eyes turned back toward Fluttershy as she gasped.

"Oh no," whispered Mahara, her fragile words carrying across the room.

Berry Punch, now so drunk that she had decided to carry the entire punch bowl around with her, had evidently bumped into Mahara, spilling the contents of the bowl over the red mare. The drunk, overly protective parent mumbled incoherent apologies as Mahara looked over her bandages with wide eyed terror. Having taken the soaking hit directly, they began to come apart. Other ponies took notice as flimsy, soggy lengths of bandage fell away the red mare, collecting in a wet, tangled heap despite her efforts to keep them wrapped around her.

A wave of gasps and sounds of confusion broke the silence. The appendages sprouting from her back resembled wings, but on closer inspection, they were noticeably lacking in feathers, looking more like flesh folded in on itself in the shape of wings. Mahara turned in place, looking for a way to the door, but the crowd of drunken ponies surrounded her. The mumbled buzz intensified, ponies shoving each other

aside to try and get a better look at the strange not-quite-wings attached where wings should normally grow.

"That ain't natural..." stated Applejack from somewhere in the crowd.

"She's not an earth pony, then?" someone asked through the rising commotion.

"She's sure not a pegasus," answered another pony.

Twilight stepped through the ring of onlookers, coldly staring down Mahara. Her horn began to glow.

"So what are you really, Mahara?" Twilight took another step closer, her horn glowing brighter. "And don't think I didn't notice what happened when you stepped into sunlight on the way to Rarity's."

Fluttershy was struggling somewhere in the crowd, trying to get to Mahara. "She has a skin condition!"

Mahara backed up against the crowd, some ponies stepping aside, others more interested in keeping the red mare in the circle, apparently finding empathy with Twilight's prosecution.

"A skin condition that turns her white as a ghost the moment she steps outside? There's more to this than you're willing to tell her, isn't there? What about your fangs? What about those *things* growing out of your back?"

"She was attacked by griffons!" Fluttershy had nearly shoved her way into the circle. "Leave her alone, Twilight!"

"Twilight, dear, Fluttershy is right." Rarity was only barely visible through the crowd. "This is all a bit too dramatic..."

"So she's a little weeeeird," Pinkie Pie warbled, standing on her hind legs. "She just looks weirder than she acts is all! We're all a little weird! Hey, I've got a song just for this!"

"Oh, Pinkie!" cried several ponies, including Twilight Sparkle and Rarity. "Don't!"

The pink mare took a deep breath, grinning from ear to ear.

"Weeeeeeeell some of us stay up too late with noses stuck in books;

"And some of us are way too into how we dress and look!

"Some of us are way too loud and maybe play too much;

"And some of us keep voices down and wouldn't want to fuss!

"But maybe that's the secret to what makes us such good friends;

"And being weird shouldn't be feared cause that makes friendships end!

"So lend an ear and listen clear cause what I'm telling you

"Is something all of you should know and believe to be true!

"Weeeeeee're all a little weird round here but hey that's nothing new!

“Don’t let those quirks and kinks you’ve got make yourself feel blue!”

Attention gradually shifted away from Pinkie, only to find that Mahara had vanished without a trace, save for the wet bandages still tangled on the floor. Fluttershy continued to push through the crowd, finding it easier as everypony realized that the object of curiosity had somehow left. Without pause, the yellow pegasus continued to make her way to the door.

“Where’d she go? Did she like my song?”

V ^ ^ V