

Twilight was trotting along behind Fluttershy, letting the pegasus lead her. The walk had given her time to check her list without being spotted, which was an opportunity she appreciated; it meant she could keep herself focused on what she had to do. She was also very conscious of a hot air balloon less-than-subtly lurking above them, keeping a watchful eye on the pair. Twilight elected to ignore that.

'Okay, so, I should do item number five first, then item number three. Or, wait, no. Should I go in order? Does the order make a difference?' she thought to herself.

"Twilight?" Fluttershy said.

"Gah!" Twilight jumped, startled, immediately stashing the note in her dress.

Fluttershy didn't appear to hear the sound. "Um...we're here?" she said, smiling sheepishly as she came down to the ground, holding her gift of flowers in her wing.

"Oh! Of...of course we are!" Twilight chuckled, feigning casualness.

'Item number six,' she internally reminded herself, 'A true romantic always holds the door open for their partner.'

"Here. Let me get that for you," she said, politely standing by the door, her horn glowing with magic as she opened it, gesturing for Fluttershy to go in ahead of her.

"Did ya see that?" Applejack nudged Rarity, the ponies now hidden behind the décor of a nearby restaurant, where they were inconspicuously (or so they hoped) sharing a table while spying on their friends through gaps in the garden hedge. "Told ya she liked her."

"What a charmer. What manners!" Rarity enthused, watching the two lovebirds through a golden pair of opera glasses. "Speaking of which, will you take off that hat!" she scolded Applejack, snatching it from her, leading to a tug-of-war between the two, which AJ ultimately won.

Rarity huffed. If anything was going to give them away, that hat would be it.

As she approached the door, Fluttershy's initial instinct was to say 'Thank you', but, then again, she was supposed to be acting aloof, just like Rarity had told her to do. 'Thank you' wasn't very aloof. It was too earnest. Maybe she should just say 'Thanks'. 'Thanks' was more casual, right? But, then, she didn't want to be *too* casual. Then she would just seem rude, or disinterested. Oh, no. What did she say? Thanks or thank you? Thanks or thank you? Thanks or thank you?

"Thank!" Fluttershy eventually said, smiling brightly. Only a split second later did she actually register what she had said, and she was definitely not oblivious to the confused look that passed over Twilight's features when the purple pony did the same.

Not far away, Applejack winced in sympathetic pain. Rarity banged her head against the table.

Fluttershy feigned laughter and walked inside. Only once she had turned away did she let the utter horror bubbling inside her slip into her expression.

“Good evening,” the Maitre D' greeted them. “Have you got reservations?”

'Several,' Fluttershy thought to herself, still reeling from her error. “Um, yes. Table for two, under Fluttershy?” she said, uncomfortably avoiding the stallion's gaze.

“Ah, excellent, Ms. Fluttershy,” he said, marking off her booking. “We have several free tables at this hour. Where would you like to sit?”

“Um...” Fluttershy trailed off, looking over at Twilight, questioningly.

“Uh, you know, it's a nice night. Could we maybe sit outside, please?” asked Twilight, trying to be subtle and non-suspicious with her request, and failing miserably at the task. Fortunately, Fluttershy was too self-conscious to notice anything out of the ordinary about her manner.

“Very well. Right this way, please,” he said, leading them back outside.

“Look! There they are!” said Pinkie, pointing at the pair in excitement, rocking the balloon basket with her motions.

“I can *see* that,” Rainbow replied, squinting as she tried her hardest to hear what they were saying. No good. It was too far away. “You stay up here. I'm going in closer. I'll meet you down there,” she said, jumping off onto a cloud.

“Okie dokie lokie!” Pinkie grinned, pulling the burner on her balloon and flying away. Rainbow Dash flinched at the impossibly loud sound, her hat nearly falling off at her sudden jump. Luckily for her, Twilight and Fluttershy seemed too wrapped up in each other to notice.

She hunkered down in her small cloud, stealthily paddling it closer.

“Um, so...” Fluttershy awkwardly began. “This food looks...nice?” she tried.

“Huh? Oh. Yes! Yes it does!” Twilight agreed, pretending to read the menu, when, in actual fact, she was slyly referring to her notes again.

‘Hmm. Let's see. What should I do?’ she asked herself, browsing her list in search of ideas. ‘Point number two: the key to her heart is to compliment her eyes.’ Twilight quirked a brow in confusion. ‘What? Um. Okay. If the book says so...’

Fluttershy glanced around, instinctively peeking over her shoulder, her eyes drawn to the spot where she knew her friends were hiding. Only a few minutes in, and already she had no clue what to do. Maybe she would have to excuse herself and seek their help sooner than she thought.

No. She could do this. It wasn't that hard. Like Applejack had said, she just had to pretend she was talking to her or Rarity. If she was ever in doubt, she merely had to think of what would she say if it was any of her other friends across the table.

“Um,” she hesitated, thinking about it. “...H-How was your—?”

“YOUR EYES ARE GREAT,” Twilight suddenly said, far too enthusiastically.

Rainbow slapped her forehead so hard she almost fell off her cloud.

“W-w-what?” Fluttershy baulked in confusion. Why? Why would Twilight suddenly say something like that? Unless she was lying to convince her nothing was the matter with them, which of course meant that there had to be something wrong with them. Oh, goodness!

“Is-is-is there something wrong with my eyes?” she asked, her insides starting to twist with panic.

“Huh? N-no! Th-th-they're, they're great! I said they're great!” Twilight assured her in a rush. Her tone just made Fluttershy worry even more.

“Oh, no! Please! Just, just tell me what's wrong with them!” she all but pleaded as her anxiety skyrocketed. She did her utmost to try and look at her own eyes without the aid of a mirror, which only resulted in her going cross-eyed and subsequently making herself dizzy.

“Nothing! Really!” Twilight insisted, beyond bewildered by Fluttershy's reaction. The book hadn't said anything about this. “I just thought you should know they're great,” she said hastily, backtracking from her apparent faux pas as hard as she could. Perhaps it wasn't the advice that was wrong; maybe she just hadn't complimented her well enough. “You seem like you have excellent vision,” she tried, still unsure why the book was so adamant in encouraging its readers to say such things.

Fluttershy finally stopped panicking. Instead, all she could do was stare at Twilight incredulously. She had excellent *vision*? What was that even supposed to mean?

“Th...thank?” was all Fluttershy managed to say in response, before inwardly cringing. Oh goodness, she'd done that again.

Twilight tried to force a smile, but her unease was palpable. Only minutes in, and already disaster. This was an emergency. A crisis. But where was Rainbow Dash when she needed her? She glanced around, looking for—oh, there she was! She spotted Rainbow and Pinkie seated at an alfresco juice bar across the street; they were hard to miss when the cyan pegasus was very unobtrusively gesturing for her to come over there right that instant. That settled it, then.

TIME-OUT!

“...Um, could you excuse me? I need to use the little fillies' room,” Twilight said, getting up and slowly backing away from her seat.

“Oh, me too!” Fluttershy replied, grateful for the out. She'd take any excuse she could get if it meant she had a chance to find her friends and seek their advice. “Sh-shame this restaurant doesn't have any bathrooms!”

“Oh, darn,” Twilight didn't even bother to feign disappointment. “Guess I'll try over there!”

“And I'll look over there!”

They both darted off without a second thought.

“Rainbooooooow,” Twilight whined as she crossed the street, looking utterly distraught at

her early failure, her pout suggesting that she was in dire need of consolation and support. All she got was a clop to the head. “Ow!”

“What were you thinking?!” Rainbow harshly whispered.

“I don't know what went wrong!” Twilight insisted, finding it unfair that she should be held at fault when she had only followed instructions. It wasn't her mistake.

“I thought you did great!” Pinkie earnestly enthused, earning two sets of deadpan expressions.

“...What part of 'be cool' didn't you understand?” Rainbow resumed, shaking the purple pony.

“All of it, apparently.” Twilight hung her head.

“Your eyes are great!” Rainbow said, mocking Twilight's goofy, love-stoned affectations.

“I just did what the book told me to do!” Twilight explained, still completely clueless as to what she'd done wrong. Maybe the book wasn't the irrefutable tome of knowledge and expertise it claimed to be, if that advice was the best it had to offer.

“You're a disgrace! You'll never amount to anything! You're just like your father!” Rainbow berated her friend.

“What?” Twilight stared blankly at the pegasus.

“I dunno. Just getting into character.” Rainbow shrugged, wanting to play the part of coach correctly. “C'mon, champ! You can do this!” she said, prepared to save Twilight from the hole she'd gotten herself into before she could dig herself any deeper. “You've gotta be aggressive!”

“YEAH!” Pinkie cheered, looking intensely motivated. “You've gotta grab that bull by the horns and ZAP! POW! GIVE 'EM THE LEFT! GIVE 'EM THE RIGHT! One! Two! Three! You're out! Ding ding ding! Ladies and gentlecolts, here is your winner, and NEW Undisputed Champion of Equestria! Twilight Sparkle!” she announced, raising her friend's hoof in victory, confetti spontaneously sprinkling down on them from nowhere.

“Yeah, you tell 'er, Pinkie!” Rainbow agreed, entirely seriously. A light-bulb suddenly lit up above her head (because the bar had activated its decorative lighting system). “Hey! I've got an idea!” she said, a smirk coming to her lips.

“You do?” asked Twilight, hopefully.

“Uh huh,” Rainbow nodded confidently, leaning in to stage-whisper to her hopeless companion. “When Fluttershy gets back, you should say that you've heard she's a *flying machine*, then tell her she can take you home and practise *aerial manoeuvres* on you until she *makes you soar*,” said Rainbow, thrusting her hips suggestively.

Twilight eyed her strangely. “What kind of suggestion is that? You know I can't fly. And Fluttershy is scared of heights,” she pointed out, the subtext flying right over her head.

“*Gosh, Dashie,*” Pinkie rolled her eyes and shook her head at her friend’s obvious error. “You’re such an airhead.”

Rainbow clopped her own forehead in irritation.

“Are you sure there’s nothing in my eye? There’s something in my eye isn’t there? Can you look—”

“FLUTTERSHEY!” the sudden outburst from Applejack finally succeeded in cutting off her frantic babbling. “YOUR. EYES. ARE. FINE!” said AJ, making damn sure she was heard that time.

Fluttershy cowered against a wall, more than a little startled.

“...Are you done?” asked Rarity, not keen to be interrupted again.

“Um...yes?” Fluttershy said, definitely having snapped out of it after that.

“Good. Now, shall we figure out a plan?”

“That would be nice...” Fluttershy meekly agreed.

“Ain’t no need for no plan. Ya just gotta relax, pardner,” Applejack said, throwing a comforting hoof around her friend. “You were doin’ fine until ya got all nervous and flustered.”

“Okay.” Fluttershy nodded thoughtfully, considering her advice. “How do I stop getting nervous?” was what she asked next, in complete seriousness. Applejack’s evasive expression told her the cowpony didn’t have an answer for that.

“You’re fine just the way you are,” AJ tried again, ever the big sister.

“*Thank,*” Fluttershy countered.

Applejack had to admit she’d won that argument.

“Ahem,” a smug sound from Rarity drew their attention. Floating in front of her, suspended with magic, was a glass of wine. “It’s not called a social lubricant for nothing, darling,” she said, smartly.

“Uh...” Applejack’s ears flattened with concern. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea,” she said, getting a bad feeling about mixing Fluttershy and any quantity of alcohol. She didn’t have to be a genius to know that wasn’t a winning combination.

“Just a sip, is all,” Rarity insisted. Honestly, she wasn’t stupid. She wasn’t about to go getting her best friend drunk on one of the most important occasions of her life. She just wanted her to *think* she wasn’t nervous, when it would really be her own inner-confidence that did the trick. There was nothing like a good placebo. “Just enough to take the edge off,” she said, inching the glass closer.

Fluttershy instinctively drew back, as if she thought the glass might bite her. She was

totally inexperienced with alcohol. If she was being honest, she wasn't even entirely sure what it did, except maybe that it had similar effects to salt. But, then, it was just one tiny little mouthful. And, if Rarity said it was fine, then it had to be safe, right?

"That...sounds...okay..." she said, in spite of her reservations, surprised at how seemingly easy the solution to her nervousness was.

"That's my girl!" Rarity encouraged, ignoring Applejack's look of disapproval. "Go on."

Fluttershy tentatively sniffed the glass before taking an experimental sip. Huh. That wasn't so bad. She took another sip.

"There. How does that make you feel?" asked Rarity, hopeful that the self-induced trick of the mind would work on her.

The pegasus glanced down momentarily, evaluating how she felt. "...Warm?" she said.

"Hey. Twilight's comin' back. You best get on over there," said Applejack a little too quickly, shooing her friend away before she could be further corrupted by a certain unicorn's bad influence.

"Oh. Right!" Fluttershy hastily bounded around the hedge, not wanting Twilight to realise who she'd been talking to, nor why they were there to begin with.

Applejack cast a glare at Rarity out of the corners of her eyes, silently declaring her objections to this plan of hers, and convinced that it would backfire horribly. "It's rude to stare," the fashionista commented, before proceeding to lift her gilded binoculars to her eyes once more and continue her spying, oblivious to the hypocrisy.

The wannabe lovers arrived back at the table at the exact same time.

"Hi!" Fluttershy said, trying not to seem suspicious.

"Hi." Twilight grinned back, attempting to do the same.

"..."

"..."

Oh, no. Not this again. Twilight bit her lip. She had to be assertive, and say something. But all the things Rainbow Dash suggested were confusing and made no sense, and, after that last incident, she wasn't sure she trusted her book anymore either. After all, Fluttershy had taken the last supposedly romantic gesture like some kind of personal insult.

...Rainbow Dash's advice it was, then.

"Um, you know, I think you physically resemble a parking violation," Twilight began uncertainly, earning a baffled look from her friend, "Because you have fines written all over you," she said, still confused as to what in Equestria that was supposed to mean.

Not far away, Pinkie burst into torrents of laughter, making sure to write that down on a

napkin in between giggles, while Rainbow Dash groaned and hung her head, looking about ready to give up on life.

Fluttershy blinked, then glanced down at herself, then back up at Twilight. Was...was that an insult? A joke? A compliment? She had no idea how to react to that.

Apparently, neither did Twilight. "I don't know. I'm just saying..." She shrugged, staring down at her menu, letting the awkward silence wash over her. "...Garçon!" she called out, purely to move on from that uncomfortable moment as quickly as possible. "Ready to order!"

Fluttershy timidly glanced down at her menu, which she hadn't actually read yet, figuring she'd have to make a split-second decision as to what she would eat. She peered upwards momentarily to see Twilight hiding behind her menu, naught but her horn and the top of her mane showing.

In spite of the...weirdness, Fluttershy felt a smile creep across her face. Twilight was just so cute, even if she couldn't always understand what she was talking about. Even her odd demeanour so far was, she had to admit, strangely charming.

The faint blush on her cheeks. The way she cleared her throat. The vaguely stilted way she moved when she talked to the waiter. The way her little horn moved with every slight turn of her head. It was all so adorable.

She sighed, lovingly.

"And for you, miss?" the waiter asked.

"Yeah...just, um...yeah," Fluttershy murmured, everything else forgotten as she gazed at Twilight, hopelessly lost in her features. The purple pony flushed pink when she met Fluttershy's stare, and went all coy. Those beautiful eyes. The things they did to her.

The waiter quirked a brow. "...I'll put you down for the same," he said, deciding that was the closest to a sensible interpretation he would get. "Ugh. Young couples," he sneered under his breath. They were always impossible to work with. With that, he turned and left the two alone.

"Yes! Yes!" Rarity watched with anticipation, sensing the spark between the two. Romance was in the air. "Ooh, now would be the perfect time to conjure an illusion. Something subtle that signals that they're soulmares—"

"No illusions," Applejack cut her off, pushing down the opera glasses. "This is somethin' Fluttershy has to do by herself. Your heart's in the right place, but I reckon she needs to know she can do this on her own," she said, firmly sticking to her principles.

Rarity sighed. "Oh, I suppose you have a point. But if the situation demands it, then I will do whatever I must!" she insisted, unable to suppress her urge to meddle in this affair and meticulously fix everything to the point of perfection.

"She'll be fine," Applejack assured her, confident that the next few moments would seal the deal without so much as a hitch.

Twilight and Fluttershy remained locked in place, everything else fading away, seeing

nought but each other. Twilight felt herself melt as she stared deeper into Fluttershy's eyes. Now seemed like the time. Time to confess her feelings. Just like the book and her friends had told her to do; she had to tell Fluttershy just how much she—

Twilight blinked as a realisation struck her. 'Make me *sore*,' she thought, having just gotten the joke, if it could even be called that. She wasn't laughing. 'Ugh. Rainbow Dash! You creep.' Twilight turned a hue of red, not sure whether she was embarrassed or fuming or both. Nevertheless, the moment was broken.

She glanced over to the other side of the street, planning to fix that pesky pegasus with a glare. Instead, she spotted Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie both trying to catch her attention. Once Twilight had seen them, Rainbow knelt down and took Pinkie's hoof in her own, the pink pony miming a swoon, the pair clearly trying to indicate to her that now was the time to do the same, both of them nodding when they figured Twilight had caught on.

The unicorn narrowed her eyes suspiciously, beginning to question whether they were really the best sources for advice. She couldn't be sure that they were even trying to help her at all at that point. But, hey, this couldn't hurt. Could it?

'Well, why the hay not?' she thought, feeling a burst of courage.

Gently, she reached out, and touched Fluttershy's right foreleg. The pegasus gave a sharp intake of breath, surprised out of her stupor by the soft contact. There was...touching, and... "Huh?"

"Uh, Fluttershy," Twilight began, unconsciously stroking her dainty limb. Fluttershy felt her heart pound. Oh gosh. That felt *really* good; like warm, bubbly water was rushing up her leg, cascading over her coat, sending ripples through her skin. "I just, um...I wanted to tell you, that..."

She felt those silky soft hooves running further up her front leg, drifting past her knee, towards her elbow; felt the sparks emanating from her touch. Her breath quickened. Her heart raced. If Twilight could do this to her merely by caressing her arm, then she couldn't even imagine what it would feel like if she...if she...

Except she did imagine it. Fluttershy felt her cheeks heat up. She could see Twilight coming nearer, the gap between them shrinking. Her mind's eye involuntarily drifted to other places. Her imagination showed Twilight leaning across the table, and she could feel the phantom sensation of her breath ghosting across her muzzle as the space grew smaller and smaller.

"Fluttershy..." she whispered, her voice penetrating the increasingly real daydream. "I want...I want to..."

SPROING!

"Oh goodness!" Fluttershy yelped in mortification, instinctively scurrying backwards, only to fall over in the attempt. She had been thrown off balance by the one utterly humiliating factor that had startled her in the first place: the fact that her wings were at full extension. There was no hiding it.

"Whoa," Rainbow Dash said, something between impressed and amused. "Way to go, Twilight! I taught her everything she knows," she smugly bragged to some nearby patrons of the juice bar.

Twilight straightened up, a quizzical expression on her face. She had no idea what was happening. As far as she could see, Fluttershy had just jumped back in panic, and was looking around with unbridled horror, desperate to get away from her. All because she had touched her?

"I-I-I, I gotta, gotta, gotta, please let me go," Fluttershy hyperventilated as mixed emotions ran rampant throughout her body. "I'll be right back!" she said, scampering off to find Rarity and Applejack with such haste that she tripped over her own hooves as she fled.

Twilight watched her leave, staring vacantly at her retreating form for several moments. Then, suddenly, she burst into flames, a look of fury flashing across her features, steam billowing out of her nostrils, her eyes turning white. "*Rainbow!*" she growled, marching straight over to that meddlesome pegasus.

When she saw her coming, Pinkie gasped in shock. "OH MY GOSH YOU'RE ON FIRE! I'LL SAVE YOU!" she said, hurriedly running to her rescue, tipping a glass of water on Twilight's head, putting out the blaze. "There," Pinkie dusted off her hooves. "My work here is done."

Some tendrils of smoke rose from Twilight's mane. The flames had been quenched, but her rage had nowhere near diminished. She walked right up to a thoroughly bewildered Rainbow Dash, glaring her dead in the eyes, so close in her personal space that their heads were practically pressed together.

Rainbow glanced around, wondering what was up with her bookish friend's uncharacteristic behaviour. "...You mad?" she asked, uncertainly.

"You think this is *funny*?" Twilight snapped.

"What?" Rainbow scratched her head, genuinely clueless as to what she was talking about.

"Funny? Nah; I think this is a riot!" said Pinkie, somewhere off to the side. Twilight glanced at the pony, only to find that she was reading the funny pages of the local newspaper. "Ahahaha! Oh, Daghoof! Funny, funny Daghoof! Horsie is such a good comic."

Twilight shook her head before turning her ire back to Rainbow Dash. "Are you *deliberately* giving me bad advice so I'll screw up in front of Fluttershy?" she accused, beginning to believe as much.

"What are you talking about?" asked Rainbow, regarding the purple pony bizarrely. "I think my last piece of advice turned out pretty well," she said, nudging Twilight suggestively. "Fluttershy certainly seemed to enjoy herself, if you know what I mean."

"Are you kidding me?" Twilight shouted her down, slamming her hooves into the bar either side of Rainbow Dash. "She couldn't get away from me fast enough! She even spread her wings like she wanted to fly away," said the unicorn, facing away from her friends when her anger suddenly subsided, replaced by a palpable air of misery. Fluttershy was obviously *repulsed* by her. "I think she made it pretty clear she spurns my advances..." she sighed forlornly, just wanting to go home before she made an even bigger foal out of herself.

"Oh," Rainbow Dash snorted with laughter, covering her mouth in a futile effort to stifle her chuckles as she realised what was going on, "Is *that* what you think that meant?"

“Yes.” Twilight narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “...Why? What are you hiding from me?” she asked, leaning in interrogatively.

“Oh, nothing. Nothing,” the pegasus lied, dismissively waving away the issue, scarcely able to keep from snickering. “I’ll tell you when you’re older.”

“Nnngh!” Twilight all but growled, her anger far from gone. “You’ll tell me nothing!” she said, thrusting a hoof at her unhelpful friend. “You’ve done enough damage already! You might as well go home, because I’m never asking you for advice ever again! Not tonight! Not *ever!*” she declared definitively, turning on her hooves and trudging crankily back to her table.

Pinkie pouted, standing alongside her friend. “I don’t think she likes you, Dashie,” she commented, displaying an inspiring grasp of the obvious. “Does this mean you’re not gonna coach her anymore?” she asked, saddened by the prospect.

“Eh. She’ll be back,” Rainbow brushed it off, confidently. “After all, I’m an expert at the art of picking ponies up,” she boasted. At that moment, two handsome young stallions occupying seats further down the bar caught her eye. Rainbow smirked and adjusted her hat, sliding over to the two, a devious grin on her face. “How *you* doin’?”

While Rainbow chatted up the gents, Pinkie poked a hoof against her chin, for the first time growing seriously concerned about the progress of Fluttershy and Twilight’s date. She’d expected it to be easy as cupcakes for the both of them, but things didn’t seem to be running as smoothly as she’d anticipated. Hmm. Maybe it was time for her to sprinkle some of her magic in the air.

Pinkie giggled. “I know exactly what to do,” she said to herself, casually turning her gaze to the fourth wall. “You, there! Don’t go anywhere. I’ve gotta feeling I’m about to have my big scene,” she announced, winking knowingly at the now rather perplexed reader. “Hey. Don’t just look at me like that. The story’s down there,” she said, manifesting a scene break and slotting it into place.

“Ohgoshohgoshohgoshohgoshohgosh,” Fluttershy stammered like the nervous wreck she was. She lay on the floor, curled up in a foetal position, glowing bright red. Her face was so hot that the air around her sizzled. Her wings were still painfully erect, and, despite willing it with every ounce of her being, there was nothing she could do to make them go down again. “This has never happened to me before! I swear!” she said, looking like she was going to cry.

“It’s perfectly natural...” Rarity said, consolingly stroking her mane. Applejack just looked lost, having no clue what any of this meant. “There’s no need to be ashamed, darling.”

Fluttershy timidly peeked out from under her hooves. “D-d-d-do you think maybe she didn’t notice?” the pink-maned pegasus asked hopefully.

“Ehh,” Rarity averted her eyes, uncomfortably. Unfortunately, a pair of fully spread wings standing at attention were rather hard to miss. “Well...you were out of there so fast, she probably never saw a thing,” Rarity lied, if only to make Fluttershy feel better.

Fluttershy sighed with relief. “I hope so.” Now, if only she could get her wings down again. She mewed as she stood up. She couldn't even lift herself above a crouch for fear her wing-tips would be visible over the hedges. She was going to be stuck like this all night, wasn't she?

She winced, realising she was going to have to resort to desperate measures. She slinked over to the table, reached out and took the wine glass between her teeth, draining the rest of its contents. She needed all the courage a pony could muster for this.

“Applejack...” Fluttershy began with a quiver in her voice, lying on the ground again, squeezing her eyes shut in anticipation. “Help.”

“Huh?” the cowpony blinked. “Help how?”

“I n-n-need you to...push my wings down,” she said, already aching at the thought.

Applejack winced in pain. Fluttershy wanted her to force her fragile wings back down to her sides? “Ew. No!” That had to smart like...she didn't even know what would smart that much. “Isn't that gonna hurt?” she asked. She could tell from the pegasus's expression that it would. A lot. “...B-but I can't! I could break your wings!”

“Just do it,” Fluttershy all but whimpered, just wanting her to get it over with before she chickened out altogether.

“Are ya crazy? No!”

“Please!”

“I can't! I ain't doin' it!”

“I'm telling you—”

“That's *sick!*”

“AAAAAAAAAAGH! A DRAGON!” Rarity shrilly screamed.

“DRAGON!?” Fluttershy leapt into the air, her wings instantly locking up in terror. “WHERE?!” she shrieked, instinctively diving back down to the ground and cowering behind Applejack in fright, hoping with all her heart that the beast hadn't caught sight of her.

Rarity puffed up like an especially vain peacock. “Problem solved,” she announced, indescribably pleased with herself.

Fluttershy blinked curiously, glancing over her shoulder with a questioning expression. Her eyes brightened. “Hey! My wings!” she chirped, springing up onto her legs, thrilled to see her feathered appendages hanging limply back at her sides where they belonged. “Thank you so much!” she said, so happy she could have kissed her best friend for fixing this very personal problem.

“You're welcome, darling. Now, off you go,” said Rarity, urging her back to her table, where Twilight was already waiting for her, um, 'friend' to return.

“Right!” said Fluttershy, eagerly heading back with a skip in her step, keen to resume where

she and Twilight had left off, now that she had a quick solution for her potential problem. 'Think of dragons. Think of dragons. Think of dragons,' she reminded herself as she trotted over, feeling the effect that had on her wings. Yep. They wouldn't be bothering her again.

"...What even just happened?" asked Applejack, genuinely oblivious as to what all this business with the wings was about.

Rarity merely smirked at her naivete. 'How precious,' she internally remarked.

"Hi! Um, s-s-sorry about that. I just, uh, it's, I..." Fluttershy babbled as she retook her seat, trying and failing to come up with a remotely good excuse.

"No. It's okay. I understand," said Twilight, still kicking herself for being so forward. It was no surprise that Fluttershy had been freaked out. That was what she got for following *Rainbow's* advice. That traitor. From here on out, she was sticking firmly with the book.

Fluttershy blinked. "You do?" she asked, surprised that Twilight would be so...comfortable with that. She wasn't even the least bit weirded out, offended, or embarrassed? She wasn't even shocked to learn that Fluttershy felt that way about her? And to have it revealed to her in *that* way of all ways? Had she already known?

Before she could ask, a pink blur whirled past them.

"Hola potras!" Pinkie greeted her friends, poorly disguised in a sombrero, a moustache and a poncho, and sporting a very bad attempt at a vaguely foreign accent. "My name is Señor Pinkasso! I am a traveller from a far away land, and I carry with me a song of love and passion everywhere I go!" she declared, seemingly oblivious to the looks her friends were giving her. "May I sing it to you?"

Twilight's jaw had hit the table in muted shock. What was Pinkie doing?! The last thing she wanted was for Fluttershy to see her friends interfering in an effort to set them up! That would clue her in about *everything*.

Seeing that Twilight was in no fit state to respond, Fluttershy timidly spoke up. "Uh, no...we're...we're—"

Before she could finish, Pinkie had shoved a rose between Fluttershy's teeth and whipped an acoustic guitar out of nowhere, managing to strum it rather well despite possessing only hooves, but, then, such was her way. The tango rhythm was supported by a drum beat that had no visible source.

"My song,
Is for young lovers in the night,
(That's you Fluttershy and Twilight)
It's just for you."

"Uh...Pinkie?" Twilight tried to interrupt, but, before she could speak, she found herself falling to the floor as the seat she was on disappeared. They were not in the restaurant anymore, it seemed. And just in time for a chord change.

"Hold heeeeeer,

Feel the beating of her heart
Inside her cheeeeeeeest!”

“...Where are we?” Fluttershy asked nopony in particular, receiving no explanation, if there even was an explanation for any of this.

“Oh looooooove!
She is a very strange creature,
Written all over your features,
So claim it now if you daaaaaaaaare!”

“Pinkie!” Twilight all but hissed, to no avail.

“Your love,
Is in the rhythm of the dance,
It is the music of romance,
That you feel.”

Twilight and Fluttershy suddenly found themselves being pushed together. Awkward looks passed between the pair in their incredibly close proximity, Fluttershy managing to look sheepish in spite of the rose between her teeth.

“Take heeeeer,
Make her shake with all the passion
In your heeeeeeeart!”

If they were supposed to dance to the music, they didn't, too distracted by their unexpected embrace, and...closeness to even contemplate doing such a thing. 'Think of dragons, think of dragons, think of dragons.'

“Oh looooooove!
She is such an unkind mistress,
But you can not resist this,
So seal it now with a kiss...”

And, with that, the music ended. Suddenly, they were right back at the table again, as if they had never moved in the first place.

“Welp! That's all from me!” Pinkie said cheerfully, darting off again, her disguise falling to the ground in her wake in her haste to leave the two lovers alone.

Instead, all she left behind her was a stunned silence, and two thoroughly bewildered ponies, both frozen stiff, neither of them blinking.

Meanwhile, not far away, two other ponies were equally bemused. “...If she does that again, please do hurt her,” Rarity commanded, her brain shorting out as she tried to comprehend what in Celestia's green Equestria had just happened.

“Will do,” Applejack replied, dumbly, her eye twitching periodically.

Back at the table, the empty quietude was deafening. Twilight probably would have felt

mortified were she not too stunned to think, unable to wrap her mind around the events that had just occurred. None of this was in the book. No, this wasn't in the book at all!

Fluttershy was the first to come back to her senses, upon realising she still had a rose between her teeth. She daintily let it fall out, adding it to her bouquet, which was still lying on the table next to her. She cleared her throat, needing to ask the question that was on everypony's mind. "...What was—"

"HAHA! THAT PINKIE!" Twilight feigned casualness. Badly. "SHE'S SO RANDOM!" she said, attempting to laugh it off as another one of her inexplicable non sequiturs.

After a moment, Fluttershy started to giggle too. "Heh. Yeah. She's a...silly...billy..." she said, realising that had to be it. Although, it made her wonder, had Pinkie figured out her feelings for Twilight? The song seemed to suggest as much. Oh, dear. That wasn't how she wanted her to find out. Not at all.

Another pregnant pause ensued, each pony trying to gauge whether or not the other had figured out their feelings thanks to Pinkie's song, or whether their attempts at covering their tracks had worked.

"..."

"..."

With each passing second, they grew more nervous, more unsure of themselves. Sweat began to drip from Twilight's mane. Fluttershy's heart pounded like a drum, threatening to burst out of her rib cage.

"...?"

"...!"

Realisation flashed across both ponies' features. Oh, Celestia.

...TIME-OUT!

"Bathroom break!" Twilight said, grinning unconvincingly.

"Yes, definitely," Fluttershy agreed, the pair of ponies dashing off to their respective corners.

"Fluttershy?" Rarity said as her friend rushed past her. "What's the—?" her eyes widened when she saw the pegasus immediately race to the nearest bottle of wine, seize it between her fetlocks, and start drinking, desperate to drain all the courage and comfort from the bottle that she could. "WHAT?! No! What are you doing?!" Rarity scolded, knocking the bottle away from her with a jolt of magic, but, alas, it seemed, too late to avert the consequences.

"Don't you – hic – don't you see?" Fluttershy said, trembling, tears already streaming down her face. "She knows! – hic – She knows how I feel ab– hic –out her," she sobbed, amid hiccups. She'd never been so embarrassed in her whole life. She could have died right then and there.

Applejack rolled her eyes, massaging the bridge of her nose with a hoof. “And that's how Fluttershy became an alcoholic...” she muttered to herself, shaking her head sadly. “Now look at what you've done!” she said, rounding on Rarity, sending her a cold look.

“ME?!” she looked beyond offended at the suggestion that this was in any way her fault. “I never! I never wanted her to get herself drunk!”

“You’re the one who planted the idea in her head! You're the one who told her wine would calm her nerves and make her feel better!” Applejack accused, marching right over to the unicorn.

“I never meant it like that!” Rarity explained, her excuses falling on sceptical ears. “I just thought it might trick her into thinking she wasn't scared and make her realise she was capable of doing this all along without our interference!”

“– hic –“

“You couldn't have done that without trickin’ her into thinkin’ alcohol was some kinda magic happy juice when you know as well as anypony that it isn't that at all?”

“WELL I REGRET IT NOW!”

“You'd better.”

“Uhhnn...think I'm gonna be – hic –“

“Why are you blaming me when it was Pinkie Pie who went and ruined everything with her stupid song?” Rarity challenged, not about to let herself be pushed around over something that was...well, okay, so it was partially her fault, but even so that meant she was still mostly innocent! “She’s the one who went and blurted out the truth about their feelings before either of them were ready to admit it.”

“Pinkie Pie doesn't know any better! *You do*,” Applejack countered, emphatically prodding her in the chest. “Or ya should, anyway. Sometimes I wonder ‘bout whether ya do...”

“Mommy? Daddy? I don't like it when you fight...”

“Why are you even here, Applejack?” Rarity fired back in retaliation, slapping away her hoof for good measure. “All you've done is shoot down my ideas!”

“Cause they're mostly terrible,” Applejack quipped honestly.

“Well I haven't heard you come up with anything!” Rarity retorted.

“Can't we just be a fam– hic –ly?”

Applejack and Rarity ceased their bickering to look at a very wobbly and disoriented Fluttershy, who still seemed utterly crushed at the way in which things were unfolding that evening.

Rarity sighed, well aware that there were far more important things at stake here than her regularly scheduled sessions of conflict with Applejack. “Well, we've got, at most, a few minutes to put her back together if we're going to save this date and stop her from despising us. You up for it?”

she asked, more than willing to set aside her petty grievances for the greater good.

"I'm game if you are," Applejack replied, just wanting what was best for Fluttershy and Twilight in the end. "Got any ideas?"

"A few," said Rarity, charging up her horn, hoping that old sobriety spell still worked.

"Deep breaths. In and out," Rainbow said, a little miffed that she had to be there holding up a paper bag for a hyperventilating Twilight when she could have been pursuing other, more exciting company. She sighed, guessing she wouldn't be getting to know any attractive strangers that night. Oh well. Friends came first. Element of Loyalty and all that.

"...You still got any air in those lungs?" asked Rainbow, surprised that Twilight hadn't passed out from breathing her own recycled air yet. "You're freaking me out here. Say something."

Twilight took one last deep breath from the bag, releasing it shakily, composing herself. Slowly, she inhaled, preparing to speak. "...". Her body hitched forward, and her eyes bulged. She brought a hoof to her muzzle. "Nope. M'gonna throw up," she mumbled queasily, looking for somewhere safe to stumble to before her dry wretches brought up something unpleasant.

Rainbow sighed, wanting to roll her eyes again, but some part of her still cared. Either that or she felt guilty. Either way, it was enough to make her follow her friend. "What brought this on?" she asked, genuinely lost as to what could possibly be so bad as to have put her in this state.

"Didn't you see?!" asked Twilight, not sure how the singing pink pony with inexplicable reality bending powers could have escaped her notice. Rainbow Dash whistled innocently, not wanting her friend to catch on that she had been a little distracted by a pair of stallions at the time. "She knows, Rainbow! *She knows!*" she all but wept.

"...So what?" Rainbow shrugged, since it was obvious Fluttershy felt the same way.

"SO WHAT?!" Twilight had grabbed her before she knew it. "So I'm *doomed!*" she said, looking up at the sky in grief. "Oh, what do I do?" she asked, never having felt so lost or helpless in her life. She wanted to give up, but, darn it, she couldn't. That was the price of loving somepony, she guessed.

"Easy; you go back there and sweep her off her hooves, just like I told you do all along," Rainbow suggested the obvious, since, in her experience, the simplest answer was usually the correct one, or the one answer she kept trying to force into being right long enough that it eventually worked. "Just like you *want* to do."

"But how can I do that?" she cried, falling to pieces. "It's just no good! She'll never like me..." Twilight all but sobbed.

"She does!" Rainbow insisted.

"I'll believe that when I see it," Twilight mumbled, having lost all confidence in herself. "There has to be something in these notes," she said to herself, desperate for some sort of crutch to

lean on. “UGH! I should have just followed these all along!” she said, electing to blame that as the reason her plans had fallen apart. “Gotta cram! Gotta cram! Gotta cram!” she began reading through her check list of items as fast as possible. Not that it was easy. Her sweat had practically made the notes unreadable.

“Enough with the notes!” Rainbow's frustrations finally got the best of her. She knocked Twilight's notes out of the air, and stomped them into the ground, her hooves tearing them to shreds.

Twilight could only stare in disbelief as the fractured pieces of her paper fell all around her. She tried to catch one, but all she could make out was one smudged letter. Her eyes welled up with tears. She was so devastated, so heartbroken that she couldn't even scream or cry.

“That's your problem, Twilight! You think too much!” Rainbow persisted, making sure the purple pony heard her. “Instead of just going out there and taking charge, you spend all your time up here,” she tapped her on the head. “If you'd actually spent this night with *Fluttershy* instead of in your own dumb brain you wouldn't even need my help!”

“...My notes...” was all Twilight could manage.

Rainbow nearly screamed with exasperation. “Screw this. I'm outta here. You're on your own,” she said. If Twilight was so intent on screwing this up for herself, than that was her business. Rainbow still had a swanky hat, her best friend, and a pair of stallions waiting for her. This night could turn out pretty good for her. She wasn't stupid enough to go down with this sinking ship.

“...Kill me...” she heard Twilight say behind her.

“Hey!” Pinkie abruptly bounced up into Rainbow's view.

“Welcome back,” Rainbow Dash didn't even flinch.

“Where're you going?” Pinkie asked, innocently. “Aren't you helping Twilight and Fluttershy?”

“I was,” Rainbow replied, casting a look back at the purple unicorn. “I mean, I tried. But Twilight's so hopeless at this that it's honestly *boring* watching her fail,” she said, getting tired of getting nowhere with that pony.

“Then make it more interesting,” Pinkie casually suggested, thinking the solution should have been obvious. Then again, ‘if reality sucks, make it more interesting’ was pretty much Pinkie's entire life's motto.

Rainbow stopped mid-step, a light-bulb appearing above her head again. Inspiration had struck. And *how!* “...Pinkie, you're a genius!” she said, enthusiastically, now knowing exactly what to do to make things right.

“Uh, pretty sure I'm a pony, Dashie,” Pinkie pointed out, eyeing the pegasus strangely, much to Rainbow's puzzlement. “Huh. My friend. She's crazy,” Pinkie said to some nearby ponies at the juice bar.

“How're ya feelin' now?” asked Applejack.

“Mmm, better,” Fluttershy said, making a face even so. “I still feel warm, and kind of numb, and a bit tired, and like I might be sick...” she said, putting a hoof to her head, which was still swimming a little.

“But you don't feel drunk?” asked Rarity, since that was the most important part.

“No.” Fluttershy shook her head, honestly. She was definitely her usual self in her mind, even if she was suffering some effects of the drink. Her hiccups had gone too.

“Well, she seems coherent,” said Rarity, shrugging, not sure she could do much better. She was no real magician, after all. Even trying the spell in the first place had triggered a small headache in her.

“How'd ya even know how ta do that?” AJ wondered aloud, looking inquisitively at Rarity. It was rather an odd trick to have in one's repertoire, considering it was totally unrelated to her natural talents.

“Believe it or not, I did have a life before I met you, Applejack,” Rarity somewhat snappily replied, the tension still thick between them from their earlier argument.

“I think it worked,” said Fluttershy, still holding her head. It wasn't perfect, of course, but she could live with it long enough to wait for the alcohol to break down on its own. Her symptoms were manageable, at least. “I feel fine. Really.”

“You're sure you feel okay?” Applejack asked her, concerned for her health. That trumped everything else, in her book. “Maybe you should go home an' sleep it off. There'll always be other dates.”

“I can do that?” asked Fluttershy perking up at the prospect of being allowed to run away. Moments later, though, she shook her head. “No. I-I have to do this. I want to...If I can't act now that my feelings are already out in the open, I'll never be able to,” she said, despite the audible quiver in her voice, and the layer of fog clouding up her mind.

“Well, if you say so...” said Applejack, a little sceptically, but not about to go making Fluttershy's decisions for her. “Your food's ready, by the way,” she said, nodding back to the table. “Better let 'em know you're still here.”

“Okay.” Fluttershy nodded, turning to run back to the table, but she stopped briefly, having one thing she wanted to say before she left. “Um, by the way, thanks for, you know...being here. Both of you,” she said, sincerely, beyond grateful to have her two friends there looking out for her.

“Yes, yes. Quit stalling,” said Rarity, jokingly, massaging her stinging head.

Twilight was nowhere in sight as Fluttershy walked back to the table. Fluttershy lowered her head as she approached, scanning the area, growing increasingly worried. Oh, no. She must have been scared off. Not that she could really blame her. If Pinkie suddenly came up to her and started singing about true love while trying to set her up with a pony whose feelings she'd had no idea about, Fluttershy's first instinct would have been to run, too.

Anxious though she was, Fluttershy elected to take her seat and wait. There was still a little flicker of hope in her heart amidst all her self-doubt and pessimism. Maybe she would come back. Maybe there was still a chance.

Not far away, Twilight was still trying in vain to magically stick her notes back together. Eventually, her horn stopped glowing, and she let all the pieces fall to the ground. She sniffed, and rubbed her cheek. What was the point? What good were her notes when Fluttershy had probably already run off?

“Celestia...” her breath hitched, failing to fight back tears. What she wouldn't have given for her teacher's wise words of wisdom right now. She probably would have picked her up, laughed, and said something obvious yet insightful that would have fixed the whole thing from the beginning if she'd only said it sooner. But, then, that was the problem with having to learn things on her own. Sometimes there weren't any easy answers, or solutions. Just mistakes.

She pushed herself up, preparing to cast one last glance back at the no doubt empty table before drearily dragging herself home. But—

Hold on. Was that...Fluttershy? But, huh? Why would she be back at the table? She couldn't possibly be...waiting for her. She knew about Twilight's feelings, and had witnessed her make a complete fool out of herself all evening.

After all that, she still wanted to stick around?

Twilight laughed. Of course she did. Fluttershy. That gentle soul. Her sweetness and kindness was unparalleled. That was so much of what she loved about her.

Fluttershy sighed, glancing back towards her friends' hiding place, toying with her bouquet of flowers. Maybe...maybe she wasn't coming back after all.

A sudden galloping of hooves prompted the pegasus to glance up. Twilight sighed, catching her breath after that quick burst of speed. “Sorry. Long line. Got held up,” she lied by way of an excuse, but her smile was entirely sincere. “Hello, Fluttershy,” she said, feeling like she was seeing her for the first time in an eternity.

Fluttershy felt her heart skip a beat. “Hello, Skylight Twarple.” She froze. Gosh. Maybe she was still a little drunk.

Twilight just laughed, a beautiful, beautiful sound. Then Fluttershy cracked up in giggles. Heh. Yeah. It was kind of funny, in a way.

“Um. Hey. Dinner,” Twilight said with a bright smile.

“Din who?” Fluttershy said, lost in infatuated daydreams. After a moment, it sank in. “Oh! Right. Yes. Looks delicious.” She smiled. “— hic —“ Fluttershy gasped and covered her mouth, eyes shifting back and forth evasively. Oh dear. Maybe Rarity's spell really hadn't worked all that well after all.

Twilight quirked a brow. Huh. Fluttershy was acting a little strange. But, yeah...good strange. She didn't give it much thought.

“Eheheh,” Fluttershy chuckled, electing to stuff her face with food before something else embarrassing came out of her mouth.

Meanwhile, not far away, a certain cyan pegasus snuck closer to the restaurant. She could barely restrain a smirk, laughing inside her own mind. Twilight couldn't see how Fluttershy felt about her? Well, she would *show* her. She'd make it so obvious even the densest of ponies would have to catch a clue. With that in her thoughts, she stealthily slid open a window, and ducked inside.

“This is...tasty,” Twilight lied, trying not to make a sour face at the food. She knew she should have actually *looked* at the menu before ordering.

Fluttershy said nothing, just making muffled sounds as she ate.

Twilight paused, curious as to what was going on with her now. Fluttershy was usually the natural epitome of unpretentious poise and grace. Talking, or, uh, whatever she was doing, with food in her mouth was very unlike her, to say the least. After everything that had happened that night, she couldn't help but feel a little wary.

Maybe Fluttershy really didn't like her. Maybe she was just staying with her out of the kindness of her heart, because she didn't want to hurt her feelings, even if Twilight's crush made her uncomfortable. She was just letting her down gently, too scared to actually deliver the blow.

No. Yes. No. Yes. Maybe. Twilight didn't know. But she wanted to find out. She didn't want to get her hopes up for nothing.

‘Gah, this really is the worst thing I’ve ever tasted,’ she thought to herself, distracted. Even the infamous worm muffins would have been an improvement over this.

Fluttershy's head spun. She wasn't sure whether it was from the drink, or from being around Twilight, or both. Everything was moving in circles. She closed her eyes, and briefly glanced away in an effort to refocus her vision.

Huh. That was funny. She could have sworn she saw Rainbow Dash waving to her from the window. She blinked, and looked more closely. Suddenly, it happened again.

‘I did! I did saw a Rainbow Dash!’ she thought. ‘Err, see. See Rainbow Dash,’ she corrected herself.

Her fellow pegasus was gesturing for her to come inside, signalling from behind Twilight, making sure to stay out of the unicorn's sight. Fluttershy was inquisitive, questioning her friend's sudden appearance. What was she doing here? Had she figured what was going on? Well, if she'd heard Pinkie's song, she probably had.

“– hic –“ Oh, not again.

“You know, my books say holding your breath and drinking water is a good cure for that,” Twilight commented, ever the know-it-all.

“Ooh! Good idea,” Fluttershy said, relieved that she didn't have to make up her own reason for going inside, “I'll go and see if we can get some,” she felt queasy at the following word,

“Drinks.” She shuddered. “Um, excuse me.”

Twilight narrowed her eyes. Fluttershy was *willingly* going out and seeking a waiter to bother him for drinks? She *wanted* to talk to strangers? This wasn't right. This wasn't right at all!

That confirmed it. She *was* acting odd. This suspicious behaviour definitely warranted further investigation. She was going to see what Fluttershy was up to. There had to be a window nearby. A concealed one, where nopony could spot her.

Meanwhile, inside. “C'mere,” said Rainbow Dash, dragging Fluttershy over to a secluded part of the room, making sure they were well out of sight in the event that Twilight wandered in at any point.

“Rainbow, what, uh...hey, did you get a new hat?” Fluttershy said, momentarily distracted by the new accessory. “I like it. It suits you.”

“Thanks!” she replied, proudly nudging the brim. It was pretty cool, wasn't it? “So, anyway, I just happened to be passing through the neighbourhood, and I couldn't help but notice you and Twilight sharing a romantic candlelit dinner,” Rainbow said teasingly, eliciting a blush from her fellow pegasus. “Anything I should know about?”

“Uhh...” Fluttershy froze like a statue. “...Meep.”

“You're on a date, aren't you?” Rainbow answered her own question, knowing she'd be waiting forever and a day if she had any hopes of getting the story out of Fluttershy.

“Yes,” she admitted, coyly pawing at the floor, “Only Twilight's not supposed to know it's a date, but I think she already does...”

“Want some help?”

“– hic –”

“I'll take that as a yes.” Rainbow Dash smirked, wrapping a hoof around her friend's neck, and leaning in to whisper to her. “Now, what you've gotta do is simple; you've gotta tell her (whisperwhisperwhisper) and then you've gotta (whisperwhisperwhisper)...”

“Oh! Oh my goodness...” Fluttershy turned beet red, instinctively retreating deeper into the corner, like a turtle withdrawing into its shell. “I-I-I don't know if I can do that...” she said, thinking this task required a far more assertive pony than her.

“Why? What's the big deal?” asked Rainbow Dash, assuming Fluttershy would be too naïve and innocent to truly grasp the meaning of her plan. After all, Twilight had been utterly ignorant about the whole wing thing. It only made sense that the reverse would be true.

“I just, I just, I don't normally get that close to ponies,” Fluttershy said, trembling at the thought of doing what Rainbow Dash had suggested. “Think of dragons think of dragons think of dragons.” “An-and what if she thinks I'm weird and invading her space and—”

“Hey. Trust me,” Rainbow cut her off. “I know Twilight better than anypony. I wouldn't tell you to do it if I didn't know it'd make her like you,” she assured her, supportively. And it was

partially true, anyway. She wasn't lying so much as...omitting details. Besides, it wasn't like her friends wouldn't enjoy it. She was doing this for their own good.

“Well, uh...okay...” said Fluttershy, hesitant though she was.

Maybe it was just the alcohol talking; the lingering aftereffects of intoxication that were making it seem like a good idea. If her head hadn't been fuzzy, she would have been petrified with nerves and second-guesses. She knew that much. But now? Now was her chance to be assertive. To make a move. To make Twilight see her not as a friend, but as a mare. To show her a grown-up, strong side. To—

“– hic –“

Rainbow flinched. “You okay?” she asked warily, distinctly aware of a pale tinge of green beneath a yellow coat.

“I feel sick,” Fluttershy whimpered, wondering if there was anyway to quit.

“Go get a glass of water. Jeez,” said Rainbow, ushering her away before she could ralph all over her or something equally unpleasant.

Twilight had crept around to the far side of the restaurant when nopony was watching. Alas, the windows were a little high for her to see inside, though that didn't stop her from trying. “Hngh! Come on, come on! Yah!” she said, jumping up and down in an effort to spot her date. No luck. It seemed hopeless. Perhaps she'd have been better off trying to see in from the other—

Wait. Did she just hear that? ...No. That couldn't be. Her ears must have been playing tricks on her. Unless...

Her eyes narrowed after glancing in the direction of the whispers. Twilight wasn't an expert when it came to picking voices, but she would have recognised that hat anywhere. Applejack and Rarity. What were *they* doing here?

“If you had just let me do as I planned from the start—” the white unicorn complained, she and Applejack having been locked in an argument ever since Fluttershy left them alone.

“Will ya stop goin' on about your illusions!” AJ cut her off, sick of hearing about it. “Do ya really think they would have helped any?”

“Well it would have been something!”

“Sorry. Guess I plum forgot the part where this was all about you,” the earth pony retorted.

“It's *not*. Honestly, darling, if you had just—AAGH!” Rarity shrieked when she spotted a very familiar purple unicorn standing right in front of her. “I mean, 'Oh, Twilight. What are you doing here? Lovely evening, isn't it?’” she instantly recovered, though it was still far too late to save face.

“Fancy meetin' you here,” Applejack laughed, her attempt at sounding innocent coming out guiltier than a gopher next to a hole in the ground, but then she was terrible at hiding even the littlest of things. Being the Element of Honesty was a curse more than it was a blessing.

“Yes. Fancy that,” said Twilight, suspiciously shifting her eyes between the two. “And what would you happen to be doing here?” she asked, leaning forward interrogatively.

“...Eating dinner?” Applejack went with the most obvious cover story, Rarity smiling and nodding so sweetly one could practically see the halo hovering over her head.

That was quite possibly the single least convincing cover story Twilight had ever heard, and that was counting the stuffed mouse murder incident. “You two. Dining out. *Together*. Willingly. At a romantic restaurant,” she restated, scepticism dripping from her tone.

“What? Can't two friends of the same gender share a meal at an upper-crust establishment without it being seen as lurid or peculiar?” asked Rarity, feigning offence, as if she thought her fellow unicorn judgemental for implying such a thing. “There's nothing sordid going on here, I can promise you.”

“Yes. You two always get along so well,” Twilight sarcastically remarked. “It makes perfect sense that on the one night you both put aside your differences you would just so happen to wind up camped out right next to the restaurant I'm eating at.”

“Haha. We did?” Applejack chuckled, looking increasingly unsettled as Twilight kept tugging on loose threads, intent on pulling apart their story. “You were over there this whole time? What're the odds!” A bead of sweat visibly formed on her brow as she stood under her friend's scrutinising gaze.

“What a coincidence! We hadn't the faintest idea,” said Rarity, far more of an expert in the art of shameless lying.

“So why'd you pick this restaurant?” asked Twilight, growing even more determined to trip them up in their web of deceit, just for the satisfaction of unravelling whatever scheme they had spun.

“We were just here for the, uh...” Applejack trailed off as nothing came to mind, and looked to her companion for help.

Unfortunately, Rarity didn't have the faintest idea what to say either. So, she went with the first thing in her line of sight – a certain pony's cutie mark. “...Apples,” she improvised, managing to sound vaguely sincere.

Twilight didn't even dignify that with a response.

“Yeah! Apples!” AJ earnestly butted in. “Heh, you know me. Applejack, Apple family. M'obsessed with them. Can't talk 'bout nothin' but apples. Twenty-four seven. S'all there is to me,” she said, doing her darndest to be convincing.

Twilight stared at her, unblinking. “...You're here for apples.”

“Yup. You, uh, you caught me. Heard they had one of the best apple dishes in town. I was hopin' I could sneak in here, figure out the recipe and steal it for myself. So, lock me up an' throw away the key. I'm guilty as charged.” She laughed, jokingly holding out her front hooves as if expecting to be arrested.

“Well, don't blame yourself too harshly.” Rarity pushed her forelimbs back down, giving her a patronising pat on the head. “It was my idea, after all.”

Applejack sent her a sidelong glare, clearly rubbed the wrong way by that assertion. “I can come up with my own ideas, Rar'. No need to go foolin' yourself into thinkin' you're the brains of this operation,” she said, her patience clearly wearing thin after butting heads with Rarity all day.

“So quick to fall on her own sword,” Rarity said, shaking her head as she leaned in to whisper to Twilight. “You and I both know she could never devise even such a basic ruse on her own.”

“*Excuse me?*” AJ spun Rarity around to face her, a warning look in her eyes. “Would you mind runnin' that buy me one more time?” she challenged, openly daring her to say what was on her mind.

“Not at all. You see, I was implying that you are, in fact, quite stupid,” Rarity cheerfully said, not in the least bit intimidated.

“Um. Hey. What about me? Standing right here. Interrogating you,” said Twilight, unsurprisingly overlooked by the two. This was a familiar feeling.

“Rrgh!” Applejack's frustration with Rarity reached the boiling point. “Is it your mission in life ta always be this impossible? It's like you're runnin' in a contest for Equestria's Most Annoyin' Pony and you're the only contestant!”

“At least I, unlike you, have drive. I have ambition. While you're stuck on a one-dimensional train of thought, I think outside the box and innovate because I have aspirations of being something greater than what I am.”

“You have pretensions is what you have.”

“Um, girls?” Twilight piped up, annoyed at being forgotten.

“You are a small-minded, stubborn, argumentative buffoon.”

“You're a spoiled brat. You whine, you're obnoxious, an' my li'l sister – heck, *your* li'l sister's tougher'n you!”

“You have the fashion sense of a damp log!”

“You wouldn't know real work if it slapped ya in the face.”

“*I dislike you!*”

Twilight rolled her eyes. “Forget it,” she said, not really in the mood to watch the two of them bicker like an old married couple. They'd already distracted her long enough. No doubt she'd

wasted her opportunity to see if Fluttershy was hiding something from her – like how she really felt about their little date, for example. “Have a nice night,” she said with palpable sarcasm as she turned and left, bidding the arguing pair farewell.

Applejack stared after her, suddenly feeling like she'd gotten away with murder, immediately dropping her fake fight with Rarity to wipe the perspiration from her forehead. “...Do you think she bought it?” she asked out of the side of her mouth.

“Not in the slightest,” Rarity bluntly answered her, returning to her espionage without hesitation.

“Yeah, I reckon you’re right.” She sighed. “Well, even so, I think your idea worked like a charm,” said Applejack, grateful that Rarity had spontaneously come up with the plan of staging an argument, knowing that it would get Twilight to leave before either one of them cracked under pressure. “That was nice actin’ back there, by the way.”

“Oh, I wasn’t acting,” Rarity casually replied.

Applejack glared at her. “...I hate you.”

“There’s a fine line, darling,” Rarity teased her, smirking wickedly.