

## My Time Among Clothes Hangers

“Hey, Rose!”

The mare in question looked up from a bundle of flowers, and saw a familiar blue unicorn approach her. She set her flowers down, and smiled happily at him.

“Hiya, Pokey,” she greeted, “You look like you’re in a good mood today.”

“Yeah, well,” the unicorn laughed, “It’s a pretty good day, I guess. Have you got any roses?”

“Have I got any roses?” she repeated, smirking at him, “Have I, Roseluck, the pony with a rose stuck on her flank forever and after, got any roses?” she tapped her chin thoughtfully, finally saying, “No.” Pokey’s brow furrowed, and he cocked an eyebrow at her. She sighed, and laughed.

“Of course I’ve got roses, Pokey. How many do you want?”

“How’s a half dozen sound?” Pokey grinned. Rose nodded and popped back into her shop, making small talk with the unicorn as he followed her in.

“Half dozen, huh? Not a half bad number - sounds like things are going pretty good with the new marefriend, eh?”

“You bet,” Pokey answered gleefully, “She’s great! We’ve got a lot in common, lots of the same hobbies and stuff.” Rose’s head peeked up over the counter, giving Pokey a quizzical glance.

“You’re with... Medley now, right?”

“Uh-huh. Why?”

“Oh, well... I always kinda thought she went for... well, never mind.” She placed a bundle of roses on the counter, which Pokey levitated, dropping a few bits in their place.

“Thanks, Rose!” he said, heading for the door, “Have a great evening.”

“Yeah,” she replied, “you too.”

Pokey trotted happily through the streets of Ponyville, heading for his marefriend’s small apartment. She had invited him over that evening, and Pokey figured it could only be a good sign. He’d had marefriends before - plenty, really - but none of them had ever gone very far. But Medley was different, Pokey could tell. She would last. A grin was plastered across his face as he approached her door, knocking and hiding the bundle of roses behind him.

An aqua pegasus opened the door, looking a bit worried - though if Pokey noticed, he didn’t show it in the slightest. He grinned even wider, and presented the pegasus pony with the roses he had bought her.

“Hey, sweetie!” he said, “I got you a present!”

“Oh,” Medley said, putting a hoof to her mouth, “Oh, thank you, Pokey... you shouldn’t have...”

“Aw, don’t mention it,” Pokey said bashfully, “How are you?”

“I’m, um, alright,” she answered, taking the roses, “Why don’t you come in, and sit down?” Pokey did as he was beckoned, taking a seat on the loveseat in Medley’s small living room. She placed the roses in a small vase, and sat in a chair near Pokey.

“Pokey,” she said to the unicorn, “I’m not sure you understand why I invited you over here. We... Pokey, I don’t think this is working.”

"I... what?" the blue pony asked, "What... do you mean? What's not working?"

"This," Medley said, waving her hooves vaguely, "Us! I just... I don't think we're working out, Pokey. As a couple." The colt lowered his head, his smile disappearing.

"But... why? Was it something I did? I mean - "

"Oh, Pokey, please don't make this harder than it is," Medley pleaded, "It isn't anything you did. I like you, I really do, but there just isn't a spark between us! You feel it too, don't you?"

"But, but," Pokey objected, "I mean, we've got so much in common! How can there not be a spark?"

"Having things in common isn't what romance is about, Pokey. It's good for friends - and I do want to be your friend. I know that's cliché, but I really do! You're a great colt, Pokey, and I'd love to be friends with you. But you're just not... colt friend material."

"Wow," Pokey said, his neck drooping low. "Thanks." Medley sighed sadly.

"I'm sorry Pokey," she said, "but I was never a good mare friend for you either. You tried really hard, but you never felt the spark either, did you?"

"I... I dunno," Pokey shrugged. "Maybe. I guess." Medley smiled at him, and opened her arms.

"See?" she said, "It's probably better this way. Okay?"

"Yeah," Pokey sighed, taking her offered hug. "Yeah, I guess."

Pokey left Medley's apartment not long after. She had offered to let him stay for dinner, to celebrate their new-found "friendship", but Pokey wasn't feeling up to it. He'd probably feel alright about spending time with her in a few weeks, just like all his other ex-mare friends, but right now... he'd really, really wanted it to work out. He really felt like there could have been something between him and Medley, but it didn't seem to be in the cards. Pokey was beginning to wonder if there was a mare in his cards at all. He sighed dejectedly as he made his way back to his apartment.

He found his roommate waiting for him when he arrived - though, waiting for him was not entirely accurate. In fact, when Pokey opened the door to find a white pegasus with a blue mane and a spoonful of ice cream in his mouth, the pegasus looked quite surprised indeed.

"Pokey?" he asked around the spoon, "I thought you were having dinner with Medley?"

"Yeah," Pokey sighed, sitting at the table and resting his head in his hooves, "So did I. She dumped me." Pokey's roommate winced, and flew over to the table, placing the tub of ice cream in front of the depressed unicorn.

"Here," he said, "You're gonna need this waaaay more than me."

Pokey stared sidelong at his roommate. "What am I," he asked, "a mare? Down a tub of ice cream through my tears because that cute colt in math class likes somepony else?"

"Well, I dunno," the pegasus shrugged, "You're stupid-romantic, and I've never seen you hold down a mare, so..." Pokey glowered at him.

"Brolly," he said. The pegasus held up his hooves defensively.

"Hey, I'm just saying..."

"Well, stop saying," Pokey muttered. Despite his snide comment, Pokey dug a spoon into the ice cream, and stuck the spoon in his mouth sullenly. Brolly sat beside him, taking a spoonful of the ice cream for himself and humming thoughtfully.

Pokey had known Brolly since the pair went to school together. They may as well have been siblings, for all the time they spent together growing up, and so for all the two sniped back and forth at each other, Pokey knew that Brolly really did mean well. In fact, Pokey imagined, the concentrated expression on Brolly's face was probably another scheme to pull the unicorn out of his funk.

"I have a plan!" Brolly declared suddenly. Pokey rolled his eyes, and the pegasus continued. "Clearly, Medley was not the mare for you. All that means is that the mare for you is still out there! And the only way to find her is to make your way through as many mares as you can!"

"You're not taking me speed-dating again," Pokey said shortly.

"You're darn right I'm not," Brolly said, "You're going to a bar!"

"A bar."

"A bar! A new one just opened up in town, so there'll be plenty of new faces, and you can talk to as many mares as you want - the best part is, you'll be getting drunk! So you'll actually be able to talk to them!" Pokey sighed, and took another spoonful of ice cream.

"Look," Brolly told him, "I'm serious! Even if you don't want another marefriend right after Medley, it still can't hurt to meet some new fillies, right? Get a head start? And I mean, even if you don't talk to anypony, you really look like you could use a drink, buddy."

"You think so?" Pokey asked slowly. Brolly nodded.

"Definitely. Go out man, have a good time. You deserve it right now."

"Yeah, I think you're right," Pokey said, perking up a bit, "I think I will - wait... you aren't coming?"

"Nope," Brolly said, patting his shoulder, "I gotta go pass out soon, man. Weather team has me on morning duty."

"That bites," Pokey sympathized. Brolly shrugged.

"Hey, at least it means I'll be up again by the time your drunk flank finally rolls in, huh? I'll be able to help you find your bed. Now go on, get out there and find yourself a nice colt."

"Brolly."

"Alright, alright," Brolly laughed, "I don't know why you're so sensitive, man, you've probably had more marefriends than any colt I've ever met!" the two colts said their good-nights, and Brolly disappeared into his bedroom. Pokey put the ice cream away, and left the apartment.

In a small town like Ponyville, it wasn't difficult to find a new place - particularly a new bar. All he had to do was follow a pair of colts who were trying to look as mature and inconspicuous as possible, and they led him straight to it. The pair was immediately turned away - to much grumbling and moaning - but Pokey flashed his ID to the bouncer and was let in without fanfare.

Ponyville's only other 'bar' was in fact a club, filled more than anything with ponies writhing on the large dance floor. This place, however, was a true bar. There was music, certainly, but it was much quieter, allowing for the murmur of conversation to permeate the atmosphere. Pokey took a seat at a small table in a corner, and a mare approached him within a moment. Pokey's heart leaped, thinking that maybe this mare thought he was cute, and wanted to talk to him - hopes dashed the moment she spoke.

"Hey there, can I get you anything to drink?"

"Huh?" Pokey asked, "Um, a hoofweizen, I guess?"

"Sure thing," the mare said. She fetched him his drink and took his bits, leaving him alone at the table sipping his beer. He scanned the bar idly for mares, but his heart wasn't really in it at all. Even at the best of times he couldn't really go looking for a mare - he just met fillies he liked, and asked them out. He'd never actually done... whatever this was, before. He sighed into his drink, only to find the bottle empty. He waved to the waitress who had served him, calling, "Hey - could I get another?"

Two beers later, Pokey once again sighed heavily. This time, however, somepony responded.

"I know that feeling," somepony behind Pokey said. He turned around to see a beige stallion with a thick, brown mane and mustache smiling at him, holding a drink. "Need a drinking buddy?" he asked.

"Sure," Pokey said, "Go right ahead. Er - come right ahead? I dunno." The beige pony laughed.

"Maybe you don't need a drinking buddy," he joked, "You seem to be doing just fine on your own!"

"No, no." Pokey shook his head, "It might be nice to have somepony to talk to, actually." The beige pony smiled, and carried his drink around to Pokey's table.

"So," he said, "what's got you drinking alone, anyways?" Pokey shrugged half-heatedly, and sighed.

"Eh..." he said, "My marefriend dumped me today. My friend thought I should come here to try and get over it..." The colt raised his eyebrows in surprise, and scratched his neck awkwardly.

"Oops," he grimaced, "sorry for reminding you."

"Eh, don't worry about it," Pokey waved his hoof, "I haven't had enough to drink to forget it yet, anyways."

"Well," the stallion laughed, "We'll have to fix that, won't we? Let me get the next one for you."

"What, really?" Pokey asked, raising an eyebrow at the stallion. His offer caught Pokey off-guard, and maybe even made him a little nervous. It was odd enough to have a strange colt start chatting with him in a bar, but to offer to buy him a drink? Still, Pokey could hear a very slight accent when the beige pony spoke... maybe, wherever he came from, everypony was this friendly. Whatever it was, Pokey really couldn't help but get caught up in the stallion's cheery demeanor. He smiled, in spite of himself.

"Really! It's no fun getting dumped; anypony could use a friend after that. Speaking of, if your friend told you to come here, where's he?"

"Eh, he had work in the morning..." Pokey said. He paused for a moment, then asked, "You know, I never asked your name, did I?"

"It's Ace," the beige pony introduced himself, holding out his hoof. Pokey shook it, giving his name as well.

"Pokey," he said, "nice to meet you."

"Same here," Ace smiled, "Now! How about that drink, huh?"

\*\*\*

When Pokey awoke the next morning, his head pounded as if somepony had punched it while he was asleep. It hurt so much, in fact, that it took him a few minutes to realize he wasn't in his own bed. He couldn't make out exactly where he was - the light streaming through the window hurt too much to look at, and aside from the soft double bed he lay in the room was extremely spartan. It gave the impression that whoever lived there hadn't done so for very long. The unicorn sat up in bed, rubbing his eyes, and the smell of eggs reached his nose - followed shortly after by a wave of nausea.

Pokey leapt from the bed, running to a nearby wastebasket and emptying his stomach into it. He hung his head over the basket, groaning to himself as the sound of hoofsteps came towards the door. It opened slowly, and a head poked through the crack. Pokey's heart froze in his chest.

"So," Ace said, "I guess that's a no on the eggs then, huh?" Pokey just stared at him open-mouthed, an expression of horror on his face. Ace scratched his chin awkwardly, asking, "Are you, uh... can I get you a glass of water, or something?"

"What?" Pokey asked, "I mean... where am I? Who are you?"

"You're at my apartment, Ace explained to him, "I'm Ace, remember? We met last night?" he grinned apologetically, and shook his head. "I guess you don't... I guess those beers caught up with you fast... I only had to put a few more in you before I brought you here..."

"Oh, Celestia," Pokey cried, "What did I do!? What did we do?"

"What?" Ace asked, giving him a puzzled expression. The two stared at each other for a moment, before a look of realization dawned on Ace's face, and he burst out laughing. Pokey's expression fell even more, if that were possible. Ace managed to stifle his laughter, and explained.

"We didn't do anything," he told the unicorn, "You were too drunk to stand by the end of the night. I live close to the bar, so I brought you back here so you wouldn't hurt yourself trying to get home."

"Oh," Pokey gave a sigh of relief, "Thank Celestia..."

"How about that glass of water now?" Ace asked, "It might help a bit." Pokey nodded.

"Yes please," he said, "Thank you." He followed Ace out of the bedroom, moving slowly so he didn't upset his stomach again, and into the kitchen. Ace poured him a glass of water, and the two sat down at the table together.

"So," Pokey asked, looking around at the stacks of boxes around the apartment, "Did you just move to town, or something?"

"Sort of," Ace told him, taking a bite out of the eggs he had been cooking when Pokey awoke, "I used to live with... somepony else, until just a little while ago. But it didn't work out, so I moved in here on my own. I used to live just a little ways outside town."

"So I guess you just moved in recently, huh?" Pokey commented. Ace laughed, and scratched his neck.

"Weeeeell," he admitted, "a couple of months ago. I'm kinda bad about unpacking stuff. I only really take anything out when I need it, and, well..."

"Yeah, I know how it is," Pokey chuckled, "I think it took a year for my roommate and I to finally finish unpacking all our junk."

"Your roommate, huh?" Ace commented, lifting an eyebrow. Pokey lifted one back at him.

"Yeah," the unicorn said, a touch defensively, "Brolly. We've been best friends since we were little... We both needed a place, so I guess it just seemed like a good fit. Why?"

"Oh, nothing," Ace said, "Sorry, I didn't mean anything by it. I was just curious, was all."

"Eh, don't be," Pokey shook his head, "Sorry, I guess I just get defensive about it... you wouldn't be the first one to make jokes. I dunno, Brolly doesn't really help. He seems to thrive on the jokes. They just make me feel... nervous, I guess? I don't know why." Ace smiled knowingly.

"It happens to the best of us," he said, "You'll get used to it. Are you gonna be alright?"

"I think so," Pokey said, sipping his water, "I'm not feeling so dizzy anymore... I've been hung over before."

"No, I mean," Ace said, rubbing his hooves together nervously, "about the marefriend thing. I mean, I know it can be pretty stressful, at first, so..."

"Oh, that?" Pokey asked, "I've been dumped before. Lots. I liked her, but I'll get over it, I guess... she still wants to be friends." Pokey chuckled to himself, "Not sure if that helps or not."

"Well, yeah," Ace said as Pokey started to drink again, "You mentioned that last night. But I mean, you never mentioned it was because you were a coltcuddler, so - " Pokey coughed violently, nearly choking on his water.

"I'm not a coltcuddler!" he cried. Ace blinked, surprised.

"You're not?" he asked.

"No!" Pokey said, "I mean - I don't - I'm not a coltcuddler!"

"Alright! I get it!" Ace laughed awkwardly, waving his hooves, "Sorry, It's just... well, you woke up and pretty much immediately assumed we did something stupid, so I guess I just assumed."

"Well, I mean," Pokey mumbled, "I guess I just... I was drunk, and I wake up in your bed... I thought maybe you had, uh... you know what, forget I mentioned it. Sorry." He looked away from the beige stallion shyly. Ace laughed heartily.

"Gee, thanks," he said, "But I don't think I'm quite that good looking. If you're not a coltcuddler Pokey, you couldn't get drunk enough for a stallion to convince you to do anything. Trust me."

"Er, right." Pokey said, "That's what I meant. Well... thanks, I guess."

"Hey, don't worry about it. How's the stomach?"

"Hm?" Pokey asked, "Better, thanks."

"Great," Ace smiled, standing up, "If you think you can hold them down, some eggs could help a lot. Whaddaya say?"

"Sure," Pokey smiled, "Why not?"

\*\*\*

It was a round noon when Pokey finally returned home. He and Ace had spent most of

the morning chatting idly while Pokey recovered from his hangover. Their conversation had darted from topic to topic, never really staying in one place for too long. Ace seemed eager to learn more about the blue unicorn, which Pokey had found a bit odd at first - but he decided that the stallion was only trying to be friendly. He had asked where Ace hailed from, and the pony had told him he came from Stalliongrad - Pokey had heard that the ponies living higher in the mountains could be very friendly. Ace explained to him that it was practical; ponies were too focused on helping each other make it through to be unfriendly. He had grinned wildly while explaining it though, so Pokey wasn't really sure if he had told the truth, or if the earth pony was just pulling his leg.

Brolly was already back from work when Pokey came in. The unicorn heard the sounds of television briefly before they went silent, and the white pegasus poked his head through the kitchen doorway, grinning stupidly.

"Hey, hey!" he greeted, "It's about time you got back! So I guess the bar thing turned out pretty good after all, huh?" Brolly trotted into the kitchen and wagged his eyebrows at Pokey. "So am I gonna get to meet this new mare, or was she just a one-night thing?"

"Huh?" Pokey asked, "No, I was with a colt, actually." Brolly eyes bugged, and he began to laugh hysterically.

"Oh, WOW!" he said, gasping for breath, "I had no idea! I mean, all the jokes... all the mares! Oh, geeze, Pokey!"

"Wha - no!" Pokey shouted at his roommate, "I'm not a coltcuddler! I just got drunk, and he gave me a place to stay. I'm not a coltcuddler!" Brolly continued to laugh, snorting and snickering as the unicorn glowered at him.

"Okay, okay," he said, finally managing to rein his laughter in, "Okay, that's good. You had me going there for a second, buddy. So I guess you didn't find a mare?"

"No..." Pokey said, "It was mostly empty... I guess word hasn't really gotten out about it yet, or something."

"Yeah, I guess," Brolly agreed. "We should try and do something about that... it's got to be hard enough to compete with the club already. We need to fight for the right to have a decent drink without stupid rave music boiling our brains out!"

"Here here!" Pokey grinned, punching the air, "well, not here. Or now. Later."

"Now, TV?" Brolly asked. Pokey nodded.

"Now, TV," he declared, trotting into the living room. The two ponies flopped onto their couch, and Pokey flipped on the TV.

"So who's the guy who held you up for the night, anyways?" Brolly asked. Pokey shrugged.

"He was an earth pony - I don't think you'd know him."

"Are you calling me racist?" Brolly asked jokingly. Pokey smirked at him.

"Yes Brolly. I'm calling you racist. You're a great big racist, who never hangs out with anyone but your pegasus buddies on the weather team."

"That's not true! Why, I've got a unicorn best friend!"

"Oh really? So who's this best friend I haven't met, huh?"

"Oh, you've met him," Brolly grinned slyly, "I'll bet you've gotten quite familiar with him, in fact." He grinned at Pokey, who grinned back. The two grinned intently at each other for a few

minutes, before Pokey finally snorted, and laughed.

"Yes!" Brolly declared, "I win again! Seriously, though. Who's the guy that helped my buddy out?"

"His name's Ace," Pokey said, "He's beige, and - "

"He's got a huge moustache, right?" Brolly laughed, "Like, the kind the blends into your sideburns?"

"Yeah," Pokey laughed, "you know him?"

"Not personally, but one of the mares on my team had it bad for him a while ago - looks like he's found himself another fan, huh?" Brolly nudged Pokey, who snorted and looked away.

"Oh, buzz off," Pokey sulked. Brolly laughed.

"Chill, lover colt," Brolly teased. "You feeling any better today?"

"Yeah, actually," Pokey admitted, "A lot better. I don't really know why... I guess going out really did help..." he looked over at Brolly, who was grinning madly. Pokey rolled his eyes.

"Brolly," he said shortly, and his roommate backed off, snickering to himself.

"Well, it's good to hear," he said, settling into the couch more, "Think you're gonna try and get another one?"

"Another marefriend? I dunno. I mean, I guess if I meet someone I like."

"What about that Rose filly you're always talking to?"

"Rose?" Pokey laughed, "No way. Come on, we went to school with her, man."

"Yeah, so? I dated a filly we went to school with. What's the big deal?"

"I dunno," Pokey shrugged, "It'd just feel... weird, I guess." Brolly shrugged as well.

"Well, your dating life, I guess," he said. Pokey snorted.

"Because you totally have respect for my opinions when it comes to dating," he snarked.

"Hey, I'm your friend!" Brolly laughed, "Sticking my nose in your business is pretty much the whole job description. Make fun of you, freak out your parents, stick my nose in your business... it's all there in the contract, man."

Pokey rolled his eyes. "Yeah, whatever. You gonna work nights for a while?"

"Yeah. I think they're gonna have me on nights for a couple months, at least. How about you? What are hours like in the shop?"

"They aren't, at least for a while," Pokey answered, "Inky's out of town visiting family for a while, so the shop's closed..." He grinned sheepishly at Brolly. They had done this dance before.

"Which means no pay," Brolly said.

"Which means no pay."

"Which means no rent?"

"Which means no rent."

Brolly sighed. "Yeah, I can cover it. Seriously buddy, get a more stable job."

"I have a stable job," Pokey said, "There's like... maybe two and a half ponies in town who can pierce or make tattoos, there's no way Inky would fire me!"

"Well then get a more stable boss! Seriously man, Inky's nuts! She closes the shop like, every couple of months!"

"She's not... so bad," Pokey shrugged, "So the shop closes down now and then. I still like working there. I mean, I get to meet lots of cool ponies, and I'm doing what I enjoy - "



"Well," Brolly interrupted, smirking, "considering you stab people for a living, I guess it's better than having you out on the street."

"Hah, hah." Pokey rolled his eyes. He got up from the couch, trotting into the kitchen and opening the fridge. "Hey Brolly," he called, "are we out of milk?"

"I think so... I used the last of it this morning. Sorry, you want me to go get some more?"

"Nah, I'll do it," Pokey said as he closed the fridge, "I can walk off the rest of my hangover while I'm at it. I'll be back in a little bit."

"Are you sure? It must be pretty uncomfortable to walk after last night!" Brolly laughed, ducking under a ball that Pokey launched at him.

\*\*\*

Pokey meandered through the streets of Ponyville. Despite leaving to get milk, he wasn't really headed towards the market. In fact, he wasn't really headed anywhere. He simply roamed randomly. Something was bothering him. He couldn't quite put his hoof on what it was, all he knew was he felt sort of nervous... but he had no idea why. He passed by Rose's flower shop, and sighed.

"Oh, that's no good," a voice said. Pokey turned to see Rose leaning in the window, tilting her head at him. "What's got you down, Pokey? Things didn't go so well last night?"

"Oh, hey Rose," Pokey greeted, trotting to the window, "Well... things didn't go so great last night, no. Medley dumped me."

"What?" Rose exclaimed, leaning almost halfway through her window, "That's awful! Geeze, I thought it was going great, too."

"Yeah, so did I," Pokey said, "But I guess... I dunno. She didn't feel the same? She said she didn't feel a spark between us." Rose just shook her head.

"Well, she's crazy. You're the sweetest, most romantic guy I know Pokey. You've got plenty spark to go around."

"Thanks, Rose." Pokey smiled. she smiled back at him.

"I couldn't have my favorite customer down in the dumps, could I?" she asked, "It's a slow day - whaddaya say we head over to the park? Maybe that'll cheer you up."

"Sure," Pokey nodded. As long as the tattoo shop was closed he wouldn't have anything to do, and this wouldn't be the first time he went out for something small and returned a few hours later. He waited outside while Rose locked up her shop, and the two were off.

The park wasn't very far away - at least, the closest one wasn't. One of the odd things about Ponyville was that, for a small town, it had a lot of parks. This one was a large, open field with a few benches scattered around, and a walking path weaving through the whole thing. Rose and Pokey took a seat on a bench along the edge of the park, and basked in the midday sun.

"It's a beautiful day out, huh?" Rose exclaimed, closing her eyes happily. Pokey nodded, and hummed his agreement. He looked over the park, young colts and fillies playing on the grass, and birds flying about, and he started to feel a bit better. Whatever had hung on his heart before, some of the weight was taken off, and he felt some of his enthusiasm returning - at least, until a stallion and mare trotted by, necks pressed firmly against one another. Pokey sighed, and

Rose nudged him.

"Aw, cheer up buddy," she said sympathetically, "You'll find that right somepony eventually."

"Yeah, I know," Pokey said, "I just kinda wish it would be sooner rather than later, you know?" Rose nodded knowingly.

"Patience, that's the key," she said, "We'll just have to wait together. Of course," she laughed, "Knowing you, I'll bet you went ahead and got yourself another marefriend last night, didn't you?" Pokey grinned sheepishly.

"Well," he said, rubbing his neck, "I kinda tried... Brolly sent me out to that new bar to try and find a new mare, but I didn't end up meeting anyone... except for this colt."

"Colt!?" Rose asked, her jaw dropping. Pokey grimaced, and corrected himself quickly.

"We just talked!" he insisted, "We just talked. We, um. He just sort of started talking to me... he's from up the mountains. He told me that everypony is friendly like that, where he's from."

"Oh," Rose laughed, "That makes sense. I thought - that would have come completely out of left field for me, you know?"

"Yeah, well," Pokey laughed awkwardly, "I'm not, y'know, a... I'm not." The two gave forced chuckles, and the air became so awkward that Pokey was almost glad when the tennis ball struck him square in the face.

"LOOK OUT!" the shout came just moments too late to do any good, and the little green ball hit Pokey right in the eye. The unicorn rolled off the bench, clutching his eye where the ball had hit.

"Pokey!" Rose cried, dropping beside her friend, "Pokey, are you okay?" Pokey squirmed, his eye squeezed so tight he could barely open the other to look at her. He put on a brave smile, but the hit hurt - a lot. Rose pulled him up to a sitting position, and a stallion galloped up.

"Oh geeze, oh geeze oh geeze oh geeze! He called to the pair, "I'm so sorry, I served way too hard! Are you alright?"

"I think so," Pokey laughed. The voice sounded familiar, but Pokey couldn't place it until his eye started to open. His vision was blurry at first but soon cleared, revealing the speaker to be a beige earth pony. Pokey had been right - he had recognized the voice.

"... Pokey?" the stallion asked.

"Ace?" Pokey asked back. Rose looked between the two, and asked,

"You two, uh, know each other?"

"Yeah," Pokey explained, "Ace is the colt I told you about - the one I met last night." Rose's eyebrows rose, but Pokey didn't notice. Ace was inspecting his eye, and the unicorn grinned sheepishly as Ace tilted his head back and forth.

"It doesn't look so bad," Ace declared, "Wait right here - I've got some salve that might help the swelling a bit. This sort of thing happens more often than I'd like to admit," he laughed. Pokey nodded, and the earth pony dashed off. Pokey smiled, and it was only then that he noticed Rose's expression.

"What?" he asked. Rose blinked at him.

"Oh, nothing," she said, "I guess it's none of my business... you really only met Ace last

night? You haven't seen him around town at all?"

"No?" Pokey aid, leaning away from Rose, suddenly nervous, "Why?"

"Oh, I dunno... you just seem really friendly with him. Like, it reminds me of you and Brolly together, I guess."

"Well," Pokey said, "Ace is... fun, I guess. He's friendly." Rose looked like she was about to say something else, when Ace returned carrying a small jar.

"Here," the stallion said, opening the jar, "This should help. Hold still." He scooped a bit of the salve and gently rubbed it around Pokey's eye. Pokey flinched away, Ace's pushing stinging him a bit. The salve felt cool, though, and it tingled pleasantly as it sunk into the skin. "How's that feel?" Ace asked. Pokey smiled at him.

"Much better," he said, "Thank you. So, uh, you said this happens a lot?"

"Yeah," Ace nodded, "Well, I mean, I don't usually bean other ponies. It's usually me who gets hit."

"Really?"

"Yeah, well." Ace grinned, and shrugged, "I don't usually have anypony to practice against, and it's hard to hurt a wall... it's also kinda tricky to get used to swinging a tennis racket with your mouth. You, uh, take a few balls to the face." His grin turned shy, and Rose looked away from the pair awkwardly. Pokey didn't seem to notice, once again.

"Sound like fun," he laughed, "so you play tennis a lot?"

"Yup," Ace said, "Fourth best in all Equestria!" he declared, puffing out his chest proudly. Pokey's eyes widened.

"Wow, Really?" he asked. Ace's grin widened, and he laughed.

"Not for long," he said, "Soon, I'll be higher up! Another tournament is coming up in a few months, I was just training for it when I... well, you know."

"Yeah," Pokey laughed, rubbing his eye, "I know. Why is it, every time I run into you, my head ends up hurting?" Ace shrugged comically.

"I guess I just have a... striking presence?" he chuckled. Pokey gave a snorting laugh. Rose simply groaned.

"That was an awful joke," Pokey laughed, "You should be ashamed." Ace laughed back, and hung his head in mock shame.

"Gee, I guess I'll go back to practicing, then," he said. Pokey's face fell.

"I didn't mean you had to go," he said. Ace smiled, and nudged him.

"I'm just joking around Pokey. I really should get back to practicing, though. But you know what, you brought up a good point - we need to stop meeting up like this. Were you, uh, planning on going back to the bar tonight, at all?"

"Huh?" Pokey asked. He hadn't really considered it at all. He had only gone last night at Brolly's insistence, he hadn't planned on going back at all. Still, it didn't seem like such a bad idea, now. "Yeah," he said, "Actually, I think I might."

"Great!" Ace grinned. "Do you want to meet up there? Like, around nine or ten o'clock?"

"Sure," Pokey said, "Ten sounds good to me. Good luck with practice!"

"Thanks," Ace said, waving as he trotted away, "I'll see you tonight!" Pokey waved back at him, and sat back down on the bench. He looked over at Rose, who was staring at him, a concerned look on her face. Pokey's smiled faded away.

“... What?” he asked.

“Pokey, you don’t need to lie to me,” she said suddenly, “I’m your friend. I’ll accept you no matter what.”

“I... what?” Pokey asked again. That weight on his heart he had felt before was back - only now, it felt like someone had grabbed his heart, and was squeezing it. Tight. Rose could clearly see that he was scared. She reach out, and put her hoof on his.

“It’s okay, really! I’ve known you since we were foals; I promise I won’t think of you any differently. Now we can look for Mr. Right together, right?”

“Mr. - What!?” Pokey cried, pulling his hoof away from Rose and sitting up. “I’m not a - “ he swallowed, and lowered his voice, “Rose, I’m not a coltcuddler. I’m straight. Ace is just a friend. That’s all. Really.” He shuffled his hooves nervously.

“Well...” Rose said. She didn’t sound convinced, but she smiled, and nodded at him. “Okay. So... just a friend you’re going to go drink with?”

“Oh Rose, please don’t,” Pokey said sadly, shaking his head, “I get enough of that from Brolly - “

“No, really,” Rose said, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to sound like I was teasing. I was just asking - he’s just a drinking buddy?”

“That’s - yeah,” Pokey gave a relieved smile, “That’s all. Just a drinking buddy.”

“He seems... friendly,” she commented, “Like you said. He seems nice.”

“Yeah,” Pokey chuckled, “He’s nice. I mean, I guess I wouldn’t know, since we didn’t meet that long ago. But I think he’s nice.”

“So I guess you’re feeling better?” Rose asked. Pokey nodded.

“I think so,” he said. “I think I’m gonna head home - and finally get that milk I said I’d get.”

“Okay,” Rose said. The two ponies stood up, and she gave Pokey a hug. Pokey blinked, a bit surprised.

“What was that for?” he asked.

“Oh, I dunno. I just thought you might need it.” She smiled at him.

\*\*\*

Hours later the milk sat safely inside Pokey’s fridge, and Pokey in the smoky bar. He glanced at the door every few minutes, wondering just when Ace would finally arrive. Of course, it was only a few minutes past ten; Pokey had arrived at the bar about a half-hour early. He had almost finished his first drink already; every time he looked at the door he felt strangely nervous. Finally, a tired-looking Ace appeared through the doorway. He scanned the bar for a moment, and perked up upon seeing Pokey, who waved at him. He made his way over, and sat down heavily.

“Heya, Pokey,” he said, “Sorry I’m late.”

“Oh, no,” Pokey smiled at him, “I only got here a little while ago,” he lied. Ace wasn’t fooled, though.

“I guess you just drink fast then, huh?” he laughed, gesturing at Pokey’s near-empty bottle. Pokey smiled sheepishly, and polished off the drink.

“Um, yeah,” he laughed. “How was practice?”

“Not bad, not bad,” Ace said, “I’ve got a ways to go if I want to win that tourney, but I’m

doing pretty well, I think. It'll be easier once my coach finally move out here."

"Your coach?" Pokey asked, "I didn't think tennis had coaches."

"Well, as a sport it doesn't," Ace said, "But I have a training coach, you see. He taught me how to play, and he gives me a training regime to practice - I follow what he told me to do for now, but once he gets here he'll be able to tell me what I need to work on most, you know, alter the regime."

"That makes sense. But why isn't he here with you now?"

"Well, he's got a lot of family - and he's an old-fashioned type. In the mountains, that means you live close by your family for your entire life. It's sort of tricky to convince them to let go of him," Ace laughed, "So he's having a bit of trouble getting out here. But I got a letter from him, saying he'll be out soon." He grinned, and added, "Probably with at least one aunt in tow, to keep an eye on him." The two ponies chuckled. Ace waved a waitress over, asking for a drink, and Pokey ordered another beer as well. Ace sighed, and continued, "My family... was old fashioned in a different way. It made it a bit easier for me to leave."

"Old fashioned how?" Pokey asked. Ace shrugged, and put on what Pokey thought was the first frown he'd seen on the earth pony.

"I'd rather not say," Ace told him. Pokey guessed that he and his family were not on the best of terms. He wanted to press further, but decided against it. It occurred to him briefly that it was odd he was so concerned about somepony he had just met, but he shook himself internally. He told himself it was only natural to be concerned for a friend, new or not. Fortunately for him, Ace's smile returned along with the waitress, who carried the pair's drinks.

"There you go, colts," she smiled at them. Pokey thanked her, and Ace nodded politely as well.

"But, never mind all that," the beige stallion continued, taking a sip of his drink, "I was boring and practiced all day - what about you? What did you get up to, today?"

"Oh, not much," Pokey said, glad of the subject change, "I mostly just hung out with my roommate, watched TV and stuff until he had to go to bed. That, and picked up milk." He laughed sheepishly, and added, "Not that you'd want to hear about that." Ace chuckled.

"So, your roomie's an early sleeper, huh?" he asked.

"He's on the weather crew - a pegasus," Pokey told him, "and they have him working early mornings for a while. I don't know for how long... but I still get to see him in the afternoon's, at least."

"You get along well with him, then?"

"Oh, yeah," Pokey smiled, "Brolly - my roommate - and I are best friends. We've known each other since we were little. I wanted to move out on my own, but didn't have enough money, so he moved with me."

"That was nice of him," Ace commented. Pokey laughed.

"Well, he told me he wanted to move out too," the unicorn explained, "But I'm glad he decided to move in with me. It's nice, living with your friend."

"I've heard some people say you should never live with a friend," Ace commented, "Like, you'll wind up hating each other over little things."

"I've never heard that," Pokey said, tilting his head a bit, "But... well, we've lived together for a couple years now, so I'm pretty sure we're fine. I know there's probably nothing Brolly

could do that would make me hate him.” The unicorn chuckled, and Ace smiled.

“It sounds nice,” he said. “So, you mentioned your roommate is a weather pegasus - what about you? What do you do?”

“You mean what I do for a living?” Pokey asked. He was genuinely surprised that Ace asked. Most ponies, upon seeing his cutie mark, would spend more time trying to find out what ‘silly’ talent he had than actually considering asking him.

“Sure,” Ace said, “You know what I do, right? Tennis - but I don’t know what you do, so it’s only fair. Plus...” He grinned, and rubbed his neck, “I’ll admit I’m kind of curious about your cutie mark...”

“You aren’t the only one,” Pokey laughed. “I work at the tattoo shop here in town - but I actually only really do piercings.”

“Really?” Ace’s eyebrows rose, “You’re a pierceist?”

“Piercer,” Pokey corrected, “but yeah. We actually get more business than you’d think from a small town. Lots of young fillies come in to get their ears pierced, and there’s even a couple of ponies who get body mods. There was a filly once who wanted piercings all down her back, and she got them all laced up, and there’s one colt who comes in every...” Pokey paused, and thought back, “three weeks or so, I think. If he got any more face piercings, I swear you could use him as a weapon!” Pokey laughed.

“I think I might have seen that colt around,” Ace chuckled, “But I guess I’m sorta surprised. I always thought that piercers were supposed to have lots of piercings themselves.”

“Well, it’s not like there’s a rule,” Pokey chuckled, “A lot of us get one or two piercings at least, just so we know how it feels, but not all of us. I used to have a few, though.”

“Really? How come you don’t anymore?”

“Well...” Pokey said, grinning embarrassedly, “I got my first one when I was little - it was how I got my cutie mark, actually, I gave it to myself - and I guess I sorta convinced myself that a piercer should have plenty of piercings. So I got a few more earrings, and a nose piercing or two... I got into body modding for a little bit, and I started to stretch my ears out - you know, those great, big hoop earrings?” he waved his hooves in circles in front of his ears, and Ace laughed heartily.

“Oh Celestia, really? What made you get rid of them?”

“I thought it was cool when I was doing it,” Pokey shrugged, rubbing his foreleg sheepishly, “Until I finally caught a look at myself in the mirror. I looked like somepony from a circus sideshow.” He and Ace both laughed, and Pokey took a sip of his beer. “I was just a dumb teenager. I mean, the look works for some ponies, but for me? No way. I took out all my piercings after that, and let them heal. I figured I’d just go back to being plain old Pokey Pierce.”

“Well, I’m glad you did,” Ace smiled at him, “I like plain old Pokey Pierce. I can’t imagine what you’d look like with all those rings in your face.”

“Um, thanks,” Pokey said, completely unable to think of anything else to say. He felt a slight blush creep into his cheeks, and he took a deep drink of his beer. He searched for a way to change the subject, and blurted out a question.

“So how did you get into tennis?” he asked. Ace leaned back in his chair, and thought.

“Huh,” he said, “Let me think... it was a real long time ago. I think it might have been a friend who got me into it first... His parents made him do it or something, and he dragged me

along to his practices with him. I thought it looked fun, so I gave it a try, and it turned out I was pretty good at it, too. My coach found me, and asked if I wanted to train with him, and well... a lot of practice and competitions later, here I am!" he looked around, and grinned. "Well, not here specifically. I mean, it's nice to relax a bit after practice sometimes, but I don't actually drink that often."

"No?" Pokey asked, "Then what brought you here tonight and last night?"

"Well last night I just needed to unwind a bit," Ace shrugged, "I'd had a... tiring day." He looked away, and Pokey got the impression he didn't want to talk about it. This time, however, the unicorn let his curiosity and concern for his friend out.

"What happened?" he asked. Ace sipped at his drink.

"Eh... We're here to have a good time, aren't we? We shouldn't be thinking about that sort of thing..."

"Talking about it might make you feel better," Pokey said, "You never know." Ace laughed dryly at him.

"Maybe you should have been a psychiatrist instead," he commented, "Alright. I just had a run-in with an old ex. Things... didn't end on good terms with us. He had a temper, see. He never got violent, or anything - he was a little guy, so it wouldn't have been a big deal - I just got tired of having to deal with him, you know? I got tired of being yelled at all the time. So I left him. Well, I saw him again today. He claimed he'd changed, and he wanted to get back together with me, but... well, I just wanted to have lunch to myself, and he wouldn't leave me alone. I told him to buzz off. Turns out he hadn't changed so much after all." The earth pony snorted, and sipped at his drink. Pokey simply blinked, as he had done since Ace began his story. The beige pony looked at him, and raised an eyebrow. "Pokey?" he asked.

"He?" the unicorn croaked. Ace sighed, and drank deeply. Pokey shook his head, and apologized. "I'm sorry!" he said, "Really. I didn't mean to sound like there was anything wrong with it, I just, um..." He struggled to come up with words to describe just what he had felt. "I was just surprised, is all," he concluded, telling himself just as much as he told Ace. The beige pony smiled.

"You aren't the only one," Ace told him, "We aren't all walking stereotypes, you know."

"Y-yeah," Pokey chuckled awkwardly, "Sorry again."

"Don't worry about it," Ace told him, "Like I said, you aren't the only pony I've ever surprised with it. At least you didn't freak out and run, or something." He grinned, and finished his drink. He swirled the ice around the bottom of his glass, and commented, "Huh... I do kinda feel better. Thanks, Pokey." He smiled earnestly at the unicorn, who smiled back in spite of himself.

"You're welcome," he said. Ace set down his glass, and stood up.

"I guess I should get going," he said.

"Already?" Pokey asked, a bit disappointed.

"Yeah. I have to practice again tomorrow, and I'm pretty tired already. I'll need a good night's sleep. Besides," he added, as Pokey finished the last of his beer, "I thought you wanted to spend some time with me where your head didn't hurt? That's not gonna happen if we stay here drinking all night."

"I guess you're right," Pokey chuckled, "I guess I expected to spend a bit more time with

you than... what, a half-hour? Maybe?" Ace nodded, and grinned his familiar grin.

"True," he said, "So, maybe we should find something to do that meets both?"

"What do you mean?" Pokey asked.

"Something where we can spend time together, and doesn't make your head hurt," Ace told him, "Like... why don't we go have lunch together, or something?"

"Uh..." Pokey said, leaning away from the colt. Ace laughed, catching on immediately.

"No, not as a date, Pokey. If I was asking you on a date, I'd have asked you to dinner. Lunch is friend territory."

"Oh," Pokey chuckled awkwardly, "right... sorry."

"Relax, buddy," Ace told him, "It's not like I'm gonna try and sneak into bed with you or something. You're not a coltcuddler, and I respect that. Besides, it's not like I need to want to get in your bed to be friends with you, right?"

"Right," Pokey nodded gratefully. "So, lunch? Tomorrow, or something?"

"Mmm, not tomorrow," Ace shook his head, "I need my practice for the next few days. How about this Saturday, how does that sound?"

"Sounds good to me," Pokey smiled.

"Great! Why don't we meet in the park we were at today at around noon?"

"It's a plan." Pokey grinned.

"Not a date," Ace grinned back.

"Right," Pokey laughed. He watched the beige pony walk away from the table, and called out to him as a thought reached Pokey's mind.

"Hey Ace," he said. Ace looked back at him, and Pokey continued, "I'm sorry to hear about the colt friend thing. I hope you're feeling better." Ace laughed heartily, and waved goodbye to the unicorn, before exiting the bar. Pokey stood as well, and made his own way home.

\*\*\*

The next day Pokey was awake and sitting at the kitchen table when Brolly came home. The unicorn munched happily on a bowl of cereal as Brolly flew through the door.

"Get a job, you bum!" the pegasus shouted, lobbing his keys at Pokey. The unicorn caught them with his magic, and laughed at his roommate.

"You're just jealous that I get to sleep in," Pokey said.

"Yes, I am," Brolly replied, taking his keys back. "You're in a better mood today... are you sure you're Pokey?" he eyed the unicorn theatrically, who simply chuckled.

"Pretty sure," Pokey said, "I dunno. I guess I'm in a pretty good mood. I went back to the bar last night-"

"Dude, did you meet another mare?" Brolly asked excitedly, "How far did you get?"

"No, I didn't meet a mare," Pokey rolled his eyes, "I was just hanging out with Ace again." Brolly looked at him for a moment, before asking,

"So how far did you make it with him?" Pokey scowled, and Brolly laughed, jostling the unicorn happily. "There's my Pokey!" he laughed. He sat across the table from Pokey, and commented, "Seriously, though. You met this guy a couple days ago. You're spending a lot of



time with him.”

“He wanted to apologize to me,” Pokey explained, “After he got me in the face with a ball-” He stopped as Brolly snorted back a laugh, and corrected himself, “TENNIS ball. He’s a tennis player. We just had a couple drinks, and talked for a while.”

“Still, I’m getting sort of jealous,” Brolly joked, “You’ve got another stallion in your life! I thought we had something special!”

“What are you talking about? I’ve got plenty of other friends.” Pokey scoffed.

“You’ve got other friends, yeah - like Rose, or Inky, or what’s-her-name from the coffee shop. But they’re all mares! I’m pretty much the only colt friend you’ve got!”

Pokey thought about for a moment. “Oh goddess,” he laughed, “You’re right! I guess it’s a good thing I met Ace after all!”

“Are you crazy? You were surrounded by mares! You were getting this like... sensitive nice guy reputation, or something. Mares like that. The more colts you know, the faster that’s going to disappear.”

“Right,” Pokey laughed, “You just want to keep me all for yourself.”

“Yes,” Brolly exclaimed dramatically, “You’ve found me out! I simply cannot help myself, thinking of you running into his big, strong hooves like that! Thinking of you swooning over his mustache-” a spoonful of cereal struck him on the face, and he broke down laughing. Despite his annoyance at his roommates taunting, Pokey eventually joined in laughing as well. When the two settled down, Brolly wiped off his face and asked,

“So when do I get to meet this guy anyways?”

“What?”

“This Ace guy. It sounds like you and him are getting to be good friends. What, don’t I get to meet my best bud’s other friends?”

“I guess,” Pokey said, “I guess it never occurred to me. Maybe I’ll bring him around to meet you on Saturday.”

“What’s so special about Saturday?” Brolly asked. He trotted past Pokey, picking up his now-empty bowl and taking it to the sink.

“I’m going out to lunch with him on Saturday,” Pokey said. He heard the bowl clatter to the ground, and turned to see Brolly staring at him, an awkward half-smile playing on his lips.

“What?” the shocked pegasus asked, “Are... are you serious? You’ve got a date with this guy?”

“It’s not a date!” Pokey said, “Seriously Brolly, enough with the jokes. I’m not a coltcuddler!” Brolly relaxed visibly, and chuckled a bit.

“Okay, okay,” he said, “I’m sorry. But seriously man... if you don’t like the jokes, don’t keep doing that to me.” Pokey gave a surly grumble, and Brolly trotted past him into the living room. The unicorn sulked at the table by himself for a while. He considered breaking the date with Ace - no, NOT date, he reminded himself. They were just having lunch together. As friends. Anyways, it didn’t seem right to him. Ace had wanted to spend time with him. Despite how... uncomfortable he could feel around the stallion sometimes, Pokey was looking forward to it as well.

The rest of the week trudged by for Pokey. This always happened when Inky closed the

shop. There was nothing for the blue unicorn to do except watch television, nothing to keep him occupied. So the hours just drifted by. He found himself pacing through the apartment a lot, which was unusual for him. But there was something on his mind - it was that same something from the day he met Ace in the park. He still couldn't put his hoof on just what it was, though. There was just this nagging feeling at the back of his mind, chasing him wherever he went. As the week went on he found himself thinking more and more of Ace, and their impending lunch together. Perhaps it was a way of fending off that nagging feeling - whether he did it on purpose or not, it was certainly working.

*I must just be missing work*, he had thought to himself, *having something to look forward to is taking my mind off it.*

It wasn't completely effective, however. There was still a nervous feeling, a feeling that only magnified as the days passed. By the time Saturday came, he felt unbelievably nervous.

He brushed his curly mane for probably the fourth time that day. Brolly stared into the bathroom, having woken early out of habit.

"If it's as much of a 'not date' as you say it is," the white pegasus commented, "Why are you making such a big deal out of this?"

"I'm not making a big deal," Pokey said absent-mindedly, "I'm just brushing my mane. You need to take care of long hair. Make sure it doesn't get tangled."

"I have literally never seen you brush your mane this much. Seriously. Do you want me to help you pick out a dress and matching earrings?"

"Buzz off," Pokey said, walking out of the bathroom. "Actually though, I've been thinking of getting an earring again. What do you think?"

"Seriously? Dude, you remember where that went last time. No way. Never again, man."

"I'm not gonna go overboard this time," Pokey promised, "I'm just thinking one earring."

"Eh, I dunno... I think you look better without it. Especially if you don't want people thinking you're a coltcuddler."

"You think so?" Pokey asked, concerned.

"It's up to you, man. I won't judge... out loud." Brolly smirked. Pokey just sighed.

"Whatever... It's 11:30. I'm gonna get going."

"You still planning on bringing Ace 'round after?"

"I guess so," Pokey said. Brolly said something else, but the unicorn didn't pay much attention. He trotted out the door, and to the park where he and Ace said they'd meet. This time, the earth pony was waiting for him."

"Hey, Pokey!" he shouted, waving to the blue pony. Pokey waved back, his nerves starting to let up upon seeing the friendly stallion.

"Hey," he called back, "Looks like I made you wait this time. Sorry about that."

"Naw," Ace said, "I was here training already anyhow."

"You were still training? I thought you said you wouldn't be on Saturday?" Pokey asked, concerned he had inconvenienced his friend.

"I train every day," Ace laughed, "But I don't do it all day long on weekends. On weekends, it's more a hobby than a job, I guess."

"Oh, I see," Pokey said, "I'm glad to hear that. So, speaking of, did your coach arrive

yet?"

"Nah, not yet," Ace told him, "I'd give it another week or so." His stomach rumbled quietly, and he laughed. "Well," he said, "I think that sounds like a lunch bell! Are you hungry too?"

"Yeah," Pokey lied - he had relaxed some, but he was still too nervous to even think about food. "Did you have somewhere in mind?"

"Yeah, there's a pretty good place nearby here," Ace replied, "I end up going there a lot. There's a good view, and they have really great food."

"Sounds good to me," Pokey smiled, "Lead the way!"

The beige earth pony led Pokey through the park, chatting happily with the unicorn as they walked. Pokey could feel his apprehension slipping away as they trotted through the grass.

*I don't know what I was so worried about,* he thought to himself, laughing as Ace cracked a joke. *This is fun. Ace doesn't care whether or not I'm a coltcuddler... I'm sure nopony else thinks that, either.*

The pair arrived at the restaurant, and Ace sat at one of the outdoor tables. Pokey sat across from him, and peeked inside the menu. Ace didn't bother to look.

"You know what you're getting already?" Pokey asked. Ace nodded.

"Yup," he said, "I get the same thing every time I come here. They make a great Egg and Tofu sandwich."

"You really have the same thing every time?" Pokey asked again, "You don't ever want to try anything new? What, have you had everything on the menu?" Ace laughed.

"Well... no. I got used to looking for really high-protein foods for after training, see... I haven't really had much else."

"So you just eat the same foods because they're better for you?"

"Pretty much. My coach would skin me alive if he found out I was eating something that would be bad for me, so I just play it safe."

"I guess that makes sense," Pokey said, shrugging, "But it still seems sorta boring. I'm gonna look for something interesting here."

"Suit yourself," Ace laughed, "I'm sure they've got plenty good food here. But I'm gonna stick with my tofu and egg."

"So does everything you do have a routine?" Pokey asked, looking through the menu.

"Well, not everything. But a lot of things. A lot of work goes into being the best you can be, you know? And that usually means a routine. But I can be more spontaneous when I'm relaxing."

"Spontaneous?" Pokey asked, "That's not a word you hear with relaxing a lot."

"Sure!" Ace grinned, "Some days I watch the sports channel, some days I watch the cooking channel!" he laughed.

"You cook?"

"Well... sometimes," Ace said, "but mostly it was a joke."

"Oh," Pokey said. He buried his face in the menu, embarrassed that he had missed the joke.

"... Just like my cooking," Ace added. He and Pokey both laughed at this. Pokey smiled earnestly at the colt, and continued to search through the menu. Ace let him read for a while,

staying silent until the unicorn was finished. When he was, Ace grinned again, and launched into a story.

"I had a colt friend once who tried to teach me to cook once," he recounted. "The thing was, he wasn't very good himself. He was proud of his cooking, so I went along with it, but..." The colt pulled a face, and Pokey chuckled. "I guess he was actually the best in his family, somehow," Ace continued, "He used to watch the cooking channel all the time, trying to get new ideas. Anyways, the day he tried to teach me how to cook, he'd been watching a show about cooking with wine. Only he had just caught little bits of the show, so he didn't know exactly how it went."

"Oh goddess," Pokey chuckled, "Please tell me this isn't going where I think it is..."

"Oh, it's better, probably," Ace laughed, "See, he got it in his head that part of cooking with wine involved actually drinking it! He told me he watched the whole thing, so I figured he knew best, right - this was a long time ago. So anyways, there we are, two drunk colts trying to cook. And we're both hungry, too, so we want to cook this as fast as possible. And we were trying to make a stir-fry, which you cook pretty fast in the first place..."

"Oh, Luna..." Pokey commented, already chuckling. Ace continued, starting to wave his hooves as he spoke.

"So we've got the stove on probably as high as it will go, and we're just tossing vegetables in and trying to do something with them before they burn to a crisp - and then he says that it's time to do the tofu. And this is where the wine comes in - he soaks the tofu in the wine, and tosses it in! Now, you pressure cook stir-fry, sort of: You put this big lid over the whole thing and hold it down, so the steam cooks it faster. And by this point we're completely blitzed, so neither of us is thinking of the fact that we've just cut off alcohol soaked tofu from any air, so when he takes off the lid - BOOM!" Pokey erupted laughing, and Ace grinned like a madpony, still telling the story. "The explosion actually sent the tofu flying, so we've got little flaming chunks all over the kitchen, and we're running around trying to put it all out before the apartment goes up!"

The two ponies laughed at the story for a while. When they both recovered, Pokey asked,

"It sounds like you've had a lot of interesting colt friends."

"Well," Ace shrugged, "I wouldn't say I've had a lot. They've been interesting, oh yeah, but I've only had... four, I think. I tend to hold on to them for a year or two, so I never went through many. It doesn't help that I've only been able to date for a few years now. How about you? You had many mare friends?"

"Umm..." Pokey said sheepishly, "About... 13?" Ace's jaw dropped.

"13," he said, dumbfounded. Pokey shrugged, and said,

"Well... I can't seem to hold one down! The longest I've ever had a mare friend was a few months. They always dumped me after not too long..."

"Wait, all 13 of them dumped you?" Ace asked, "What did you do to them?"

"I dunno," Pokey sighed, "the excuses are always different. I've gotten the classic 'It's Not You It's Me' a couple times, an 'I Don't Think You Really Like Me', and at least one 'I Can't Take You Seriously With All Those Piercings'..." He smiled, and Ace snickered as well.

"Well, I think they're all crazy," Ace told him, "Don't worry, You'll find the right mare soon."

"Thanks," Pokey said, "Still, 13. I'm not feeling so lucky lately." He smiled at Ace, who smiled back. The two were interrupted, however, by the waitress.

"Hey there, Ace! What can I get for you and your - Pokey?"

"Medley?" Pokey asked, "I didn't know this was the place you worked at."

"Yeah," she said, "what are you doing here?"

"I invited him," Ace told her. "How do you two know each other?"

"I'm his, um, EX-marefriend," Medley told the earth pony, "So... can I get you the usual?"

"Yup," the beige stallion nodded, "A Tofu and Egg Sandwich and a glass of water, please. How about you, Pokey?"

"Uh," Pokey said, rubbing his neck, "Make that... two Tofu and Egg Sandwiches. And a Sarsaparilla, please." Ace chuckled as Pokey handed over his menu. Medley grinned at the pair, and trotted happily back into the restaurant.

"So," Ace commented. Pokey interrupted him.

"I did look through the menu," he said. Ace laughed, and waved his hoof.

"I wasn't going to say it," he said, "Actually, I was going to ask you about Medley. She's your ex?"

"uh, yeah," Pokey said, "We actually only broke up earlier this week... on the day I met you, in fact."

"Really?" Ace said, "So she's the reason you were at the bar?"

"Well, a bit of her and a bit of Broly," Pokey said.

"I guess I should thank her, then." Ace said. Pokey tilted his head.

"What? Why?"

"Well, it's because of her I met you, obviously," he said, "Why shouldn't I thank her for introducing me to a new friend?" Pokey laughed, and looked down.

"Well... thanks," he said. The two chatted a bit more before Medley returned, balancing their meals on her wings.

"Wow," Pokey commented, "that was fast."

"They work quick here," Ace told him as Medley set the plates down in front of them. She also put down Pokey's drink, as well as a strange red bottle. "Ah! Thank you, Medley," Ace said when he saw the bottle, "I forgot to ask for that!"

"Don't mention it," the mare laughed, "I know how you like it by now."

"What is it?" Pokey asked as Medley went to take another customer's order. Ace turned the bottle to face the unicorn, revealing a flame on its label.

"In the mountains," Ace told him, playing up his accent, "We like our food spicy! It gives it flavor, and keeps us warm!"

"You know," Pokey commented, "One day I'm going to have to go to the mountains and see if you're telling the truth about any of this."

"Would I lie to you?" Ace asked, grinning at him, "Every single word of it is true. I'll tell you what, I'll even take you there myself one day - but all the food there is spicy. Care to give it a go now?"

"What, you mean put the hot sauce on my sandwich?"

"Exactly," Ace said, adding a few drops from the bottle onto his own sandwich, "It goes good with the egg, anyways."

“Really...” Pokey said, “Alright, I’ll give it a shot.”

“Great!” Ace said, tapping a few drops onto his friend’s sandwich. The unicorn lifted it in front of his face, and the scent of the hot sauce hit him immediately. It was a tangy, sour scent. It made him a bit nervous - he had never had a taste for spicy things. He took a bite of it, and chewed carefully. The hot sauce almost wasn’t there at all - he could taste the same taste as the smell of the sauce, but it wasn’t spicy. The sandwich itself was fantastic. The tofu was firm, and the egg perfectly cooked. He munched happily - until the hot sauce struck.

It started as a tingling at the back of his throat, with quickly moved forward, spreading over his entire mouth. He swallowed, and opened his mouth, breathing in and out. The air moving over it helped cool it for a moment, but it wasn’t enough for long. The burn in his mouth escalated, and he started to sweat.

“Hey Pokey, are you okay?” Ace asked him. Pokey just panted in response. He lifted his drink and took a deep swig of it, causing Ace to grimace. “Oh, don’t do that!” he said, but it was too late. The fizzy drink just made the burning worse. Pokey’s eye twitched. Ace handed him his water. “Drink this,” the earth pony instructed, “But don’t swallow! Just hold it in your mouth!” Pokey did as he was told, and Ace stood up.

“I’ll be right back,” He said, “Wait here.” he darted into the restaurant, and returned a moment later carrying a tall glass of milk. “Drink this,” he instructed. Pokey took a deep drink of it, and his mouth felt better almost instantly.

“Oh, wow,” he said, “that’s really, REALLY spicy.”

“Sorry,” Ace said, “It’s never bothered me at all... I guess I built up a resistance to it. I had no idea it was so hot.”

“It, uh, probably isn’t,” Pokey laughed, taking another sip of milk, “I’m just kind of a wimp when it comes to spicy stuff.”

“Well, you should have said something then,” the earth pony told him. Pokey shook his head.

“Hey, I know I don’t handle spicy well. I wanted to try it.”

“Well, still. Are you gonna be able to finish the rest of that? Do you want me to order you another one?”

“What? No, no,” Pokey waved his hooves, “Don’t worry about it Ace. I chose to put it on, remember? I’ll be fine...” He didn’t sound so sure, but he pulled the glass of milk closer to himself, and said, “I should be fine with this... if I take it slow.”

“If you say so,” Ace said, a hint of concern in his voice. True to his word, Pokey took small, careful bites, punctuated with deep sips of the milk. Despite trying to hold up a conversation while he ate, Ace still finished his sandwich long before Pokey did. When the blue unicorn finally swallowed the last bite of his sandwich, and drained the milk, he smiled sheepishly across the table.

“There,” he said, “That wasn’t... so bad. Sorry about the, um, wait.”

“Don’t you worry about that,” Ace laughed, “How’s your mouth?”

“Not bad, actually,” Pokey said, surprised himself, “that milk really did the trick.”

“I asked for the thickest they had... the thicker the better, really. Yogurt actually helps even more.”

“Really?” Pokey asked, “I had no idea.” Ace nodded, and explained.

"It's the fat in it. So thicker milk has more fat, and yogurt has way more fat. Cheese helps too, I hear, but I've never tried it."

"Weird," Pokey said. Ace nodded his agreement. The two chuckled a bit over it, when Medley approached again.

"How's the mouth, Pokey?" she asked. Pokey smiled sheepishly.

"It's good, thank you," he said.

"If you colts are done, you can just head inside to pay any time," she told them. Pokey nodded, and asked,

"You take debit, right?"

"Oh... no," Medley told him, "We're cash only. Sorry." Pokey frowned, and took out his wallet. He dug through it for a moment, and grimaced.

"What's the matter?" Ace asked him. Pokey lowered his head, and told him.

"I, um, don't have any cash on me..." he said, "I'm really sorry, but..."

"You need me to pay for you?" Ace grinned. Pokey lowered his head even more.

"If you could," he said quietly, "I promise I'll pay you back." Ace laughed.

"Don't worry about it, buddy. I'm more than happy to pay." The stallion stood and trotted inside the building, leaving Pokey with Medley. As Ace disappeared inside, the mare began to giggle, and hop excitedly.

"This explains everything!" she said happily, "Oh Pokey, I'm so excited for you!"

"What are you talking about?" Pokey asked. He had a sinking feeling that he knew exactly what she was talking about, however.

"You and Ace! Now I know why it never felt like you really liked me that much! Ace is a great guy, Pokey, he's been coming here for a while. Oh, I'm so excited for you! How did you two meet!?" Pokey groaned, and buried his head in his hooves. That sinking feeling and turned into a hole in his stomach.

"Why does everypony think I'm a coltcuddler?" he asked miserably. Medley blinked in surprise, and Pokey continued, "I still like mares, Medley! And I liked you too! Ace and I met in a bar, but we're just. Friends."

"Really?" Medley asked, "But... I'm sorry. I mean, two colts having lunch together..."

"I'm not allowed to have lunch with my friend?" Pokey asked defensively. Medley waved her hooves.

"I'm sorry Pokey, really!" she said, "I didn't mean to offend you. It's just the way you were acting with him. You seemed like you were having such a good time... you seemed to like him way more than you ever liked me."

"Look, Medley," Pokey said, starting to feel sick, "I do like Ace. As a friend. Please, I get enough of this crap from Brolly... I really, really, REALLY don't want to hear it from you too."

"Okay," Medley said, throwing up her hooves, "It was an honest mistake, Pokey. Ace's brought coltfriends here before!" she fluttered off, muttering to herself, and Pokey put his face in his hooves again.

His nerves from that morning had returned, only worse. He managed to calm his beating heart, and fight down most of the feeling of coldness, but he still felt sick. Medley's words bounced around in his head, and he wished that Ace would be back soon, so he could assure himself that they were just friends. Just friends. That's all they were.

“Hey Pokey, are you okay?”

Pokey jumped, his head snapping up. It was Ace, standing over the table and looking concerned. “Is the sandwich not sitting well, or something?”

“Uh, yeah,” Pokey said, “I think so.” *That’s why I feel sick*, he thought, *the hot sauce is upsetting my stomach*.

“Do you think a walk would help?” Ace asked him, “Or would it just make it worse? Do you want me to go get someone, or -”

“I think,” Pokey interrupted, “I think just going for a walk should do it.” He got to his hooves slowly, and began to walk. Ace fell in beside him.

“I wonder if there was something in the sauce you’re allergic to,” the beige stallion said. Pokey laughed weakly.

“I’ll be fine, Ace,” the blue unicorn told him. “I think I might just be catching a bug - I’ve felt kind of sick all week.”

“You should have told me, we could have rescheduled -”

“Ace!” Pokey said firmly, “I’ll be fine. Let’s change the subject... when’s that tournament coming up?”

“Um... “Ace said, thinking, “It’s about three months... around mid-December. I’ll probably have a better idea when it gets closer. I just tend to focus on training, and my coach tells me when we go to tournaments.”

“That sounds like a good system,” Pokey laughed, “I guess you can’t afford to worry about it, huh?”

“That’s what they say, yeah,” Ace said, “Coach always says, ‘Ace, you don’t think. You tennis. I think for you. If you think, you think about balls!’” he grinned, and Pokey snorted. “My coach wasn’t really known for subtlety,” Ace said, but Pokey was falling back.

“I think I need to sit down,” he said, moving towards a bench. Ace quickly took his side.

“Are you okay?” he asked. Pokey nodded.

“Actually, yeah,” the unicorn said, “I just need to sit for a minute. Then I should be fine.” He eased onto the bench, and Ace sat beside him. The earth pony kept looking over at him, clearly fretting for his friend.

“For someone who jokes as much as you do,” Pokey commented, “You sure know how to worry.” Ace shrugged, and laughed nervously.

“It’s a weakness,” he said, “I actually used to be really nervous... I guess some parts of it stuck.”

“You, nervous?” Pokey laughed, “Go on, pull the other one.”

“No, really,” Ace grinned, “I used to worry and fret all the time. I just wasn’t really sure of myself at all. But I started to grow up and get to know myself better... that helped a lot. It can be really scary, not knowing who... or what you are.”

Pokey’s stomach lurched again, but he tried his best not to show it. He relaxed on the bench, breathing in and out, in and out. He started to feel a bit better after a while, but no matter how long he sat there, he still felt sick. His heart was starting to beat harder, as well. He opened his eyes, to tell Ace that he was feeling better, and saw the stallion’s face filled with worry for him. He felt sick again, all at once. His heart beat fast and hard. Strangely, Medley’s words came into his head.



*You seemed to like him way more than you ever liked me...*

He swallowed hard. "Hey, Ace?" he asked suddenly.

"What's wrong?" the earth pony asked.

"Nothing's wrong," Pokey replied, shaking his head, "I'm just sort of curious. You said you've had one colt friend for a few years before, right? What's it like, being with one pony for that long? I've only had a mare friend for a few months, so..."

Ace shifted on the bench, and hummed thoughtfully. "I don't know," he said, "I mean, I know how it feels... I don't know if it's the same with mares, though, obviously. But... well, it's the same as with any pony, at the start. There's that crush, you know? Where you feel really nervous around them, and you're not sure if they like you too, or you're just barking up the wrong tree... It's scary sometimes, too, if you like them before you know that they're a colt cuddler too. But if they are, and you're with them for a while... It's like there's a few feelings combined. You start to get really comfortable around them. You can relax easier around them, and focus on them if things suck. Everything feels a bit better, when you really care about them. Sure, you fight sometimes, but you make up... well, that or you break up." He chuckled. Pokey was silent, so Ace continued, "And you start to really care about them a lot, too. It sort of hurts to see them sad, or angry. I left more than one just because I couldn't bear to see them angry all the time. You worry about them, and you want them to be happy..." Ace looked over at Pokey slowly. The unicorn looked away, and closed his eyes. "Is something wrong, Pokey?" he asked.

"No," Pokey said a bit too quickly, "nothing's wrong. I'm fine. Something's just... bugging me. But I'm fine."

"Do you want to talk about it?" the beige stallion asked. Pokey inched away from him, and mumbled,

"No, thank you. I can... I should deal with it by myself. I'll be fine. Don't worry about me at all."

Ace frowned at the blue unicorn. "Are you sure? You never know... talking about it might make you feel better." He reached over, and put a gentle hoof on Pokey's own. The unicorn jerked his hoof away from Ace, and sat up. He saw the confused look on Ace's face, and shook his head. He could feel a giant, icy hand close over his heart and start to squeeze, tighter and tighter.

"I..." Pokey started, "I don't... I... I-I'm not... I need to go!" he jumped off the bench and bolted, leaving a confused Ace in his wake. He ran through the streets of Ponyville, heart pounding, the icy hand refusing to relinquish its grip. He felt unimaginably sick again, like if he stopped for even a moment he would vomit out everything, so he kept running. He ran until he reached his apartment on the far side of town. He ran inside, slamming the door behind him and slumping to the floor. Brolly poked his head in, and asked,

"Celestia man, what the hell happened to you?"

"I'm fine," Pokey croaked, standing up again, "I'm fine, I... I just need some rest. I'm gonna... go to bed for a bit."

"Okay..." Brolly said, standing aside for the unicorn. He smiled awkwardly, and joked, "So, uh... I guess the date didn't go so great, huh?"

“SHUT UP!” Pokey screamed, whirling on the shocked pegasus.

“Okay, geeze!” Brolly said, taking a step back, “I’m sorry Pokey, it was just a joke-”

“JUST... JUST SHUT UP, BROLLY! Enough jokes, okay!? I’M NOT A COLTCUDDLER!”

Pokey panted heavily, and his eyes watered. “I’m not... I’m not...” Tears brimmed in his eyes. He sat down. “I’m not gay,” he said quietly.

“Pokey?” Brolly asked softly, taking a step towards his friend, “Pokey, what’s the matter?”

“Nothing’s the matter,” Pokey told him, tears streaming down his face. He wiped his eyes, and said, “Nothing’s wrong with me. I’m normal. I swear.” He sniffed, and more tears came down. Brolly’s jaw dropped.

“Oh... oh, Celestia... Pokey, I’m so sorry...”

“What are you sorry for?” Pokey asked, trying to laugh through his tears. “There’s nothing to be sorry for. Nothing’s wrong, right?” Brolly sat in front of him.

“Pokey, I’m so, so sorry. I mean, all the jokes... I had no idea! I didn’t mean to...”

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Pokey sniffed, still trying to laugh, “They were just jokes! It’s not like they offended me, I mean, I have no reason to be offended. ‘Cause... ‘cause I’m normal, right?” Tears were streaming down his face, and Brolly wrapped him in a hug.

“Pokey, it’s okay,” he said, “It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it doesn’t! Why should it matter?! I’m normal! I’m straight, just like everypony else! It’s not like... it’s not like... like I’m some sort of freak, or, or anything,” Pokey sobbed. Brolly squeezed him tighter, and Pokey began to cry. He cried, earnestly and openly in Brolly’s hooves. Brolly just held him, heedless of all the tears that spilled on his shoulder.

“Oh Luna,” Pokey sobbed, “Brolly, Please. Please, please, I swear I didn’t want to be, but... but... Brolly, please don’t hate me.”

“Oh Pokey,” Brolly said, rocking his friend, “Pokey, I’ve known you since we were foals. You’re my best friend. I love you more than anything in the world. I could never hate you.”

“You... you mean that?” Pokey asked.

“Absolutely,” Brolly smiled at him, “Pokey, I’m so sorry about all the jokes. I never meant to hurt you, I swear.”

“It’s okay,” Pokey sniffed, “You were just joking. I know.”

“Are you gonna be okay?”

“I... guess. I guess I just need to get used to being... being...”

“Pokey, listen to me,” Brolly interrupted him. “You don’t have to get used to being anything. You’re Pokey Pierce. You’re my friend. So you like colts, so what? There’s nothing wrong with that, and it doesn’t have to be who you are. You’re still Pokey Pierce.”

“Thanks,” Pokey smiled, wiping away his tears. Brolly let go of him, but the two still sat on the floor for a while.

“So,” the pegasus asked, rubbing his neck, “does that mean it really was a date, then?”

“No,” Pokey chuckled, “But I do like him. A lot. He... probably doesn’t like me anymore, though.”

“What happened?” Brolly asked.

“I ran away,” Pokey said. “He wanted to help me, and I ran away because I was afraid to face him. Because I was afraid to face myself. I guess I’ll just... have to find somepony else.”

“No,” Brolly declared. Pokey looked up at him. “No,” the pegasus pony continued, “You

like this colt. How often does that come along? Really, really liking somepony before you even start dating them? You need to go talk to him.”

“I... I don’t know,” Pokey said, shuffling his hooves. “I mean, it’s so soon.”

“Pokey, you’ve been through more relationships than most ponies before you even knew what you wanted,” Brolly insisted. “You deserve this, and you deserve it now.”

“No,” Pokey shook his head, “I mean... I still don’t know how to feel about this. I still don’t know what to do. I’m... I’m scared. I don’t think I’m ready...” Tears began to well up in his eyes again, and Brolly put his hooves on Pokey’s shoulders.

“Then he can help you,” Brolly assured him. “You’ll never be ready if you don’t take that first step, Pokey.”

“But, he probably thinks that I was a homophobe, or -”

“Well, then go set him straight!” Brolly said, shoving Pokey towards the bathroom, “Let him know what an awesome guy you are, and let him know that you’re not letting go of him! You finally know what you want, Pokey, it’s time for me to stop staying out of your love life!”

“When did you start?” Pokey asked. Brolly spun him around, and looked him in the eyes.”

“I’m your friend, Pokey, and that means doing what’s best for you. Right there in black and white: Make fun of you, freak out your parents and do what’s right for you.” Pokey grinned, and shoved Brolly away.

“Thanks,” he said, running the water. He splashed it in his face, and dried himself off. After brushing his hair once for good measure, he was looking presentable again.

“What are you waiting for?” Brolly asked. “Go wild.” Pokey grinned, and dashed out the door.

“Thanks Brolly!” he shouted over his shoulder. The pegasus grinned from the doorway, and shook his head.

Pokey dashed through the streets of Ponyville once again. This time, however, he wasn’t taking the direct route. He took a detour, stopping in front of the flower shop and pounding on the door.

“We’re closed,” A call came through the door.

“Rose, open up!” Pokey shouted. There was a small pause, and the door opened to reveal Rose, staring curiously at the panting unicorn.

“Pokey?” she asked, “What are you doing here?”

“I need a rose,” Pokey said, “Just one, please.” Rose grinned, and trotted back into the shop. She grabbed a single rose out of a vase on her counter, and brought it back to the unicorn.

“Here you go,” she said knowingly, “I’ve been saving this for you. Go get him, Pokey.” Pokey grinned at her, and took the rose in his mouth. He wouldn’t be able to levitate it as he ran, so he clutched it in his teeth, dashing through Ponyville back to the park. He looked around desperately, finally spotting Ace. The earth pony was still sitting on the bench where Pokey had left him, looking at the ground.

“Ace!” Pokey called through the rose in his teeth, “Ace!” the stallion looked up.

“Pokey?” he asked. The unicorn ran up to him, panting.

“Ace,” he said, “I’m... I’m sorry I ran away.”

“It’s... okay,” Ace said, looking back down, “You aren’t the first colt I’ve scared... I’m sorry that I seemed forward”

“No... that isn’t it,” Pokey told him. He levitated the rose, and stared at his hooves as he spoke. “I was... I ran away because I was scared. But I wasn’t scared of you, I... I was scared of the way you made me feel. I care about you, Ace. A lot. I couldn’t admit it to myself before, but I do. And I really enjoyed having lunch with you. I’m sorry that I ran away and ruined our afternoon together but...” He looked down, and floated the rose over to the stunned earth pony. “Do you think we could try again sometime? Maybe?”

Ace looked between Pokey and the rose for a moment. It felt like an eternity for the unicorn, staring at the ground as his heart pounded in his chest.

“Do you mean,” Ace asked slowly, “like a date?”

“Like a date,” Pokey nodded, smiling hopefully. A grin spread across Ace’s face. He took the floating rose, and embraced the unicorn.

“That sounds great, Pokey,” he said. “I’d love to.”