

## Chapter 6: Candy and Rainbows

Ritardando seemed to be just fine after his concussion (because he probably didn't need two days' rest after a bump on the head), and was down and about. He was very careful around heavy objects, though, which was a rare bit of common sense from him. Granted, even the less intelligent have that kind of sense, given the populace's general aversion to pain.

At present, he was in his room, tuning that guitar he had found. It was a nice guitar, he thought. Hopefully Gold Standard would let him keep it, or at least sell it to him (there's a funny idea – buy from your employer).

“Ritardando!” called Gold Standard's voice from downstairs. “Are you up yet?”

“Coming!” he called back, placing the guitar down on the bed and bolting down the stairs. Gold Standard was in the kitchen, and there were two bowls of cereal on the table.

“Morning!” said Ritardando.

“Morning”

Ritardando then spotted something on the kitchen counter – several glass bottles, one with a straw inserted. He looked at them quizzically. “What's that?” he asked.

“It's my plan for the Autumn Apple Fair this year,” Gold Standard said, seeming a little pleased with herself.

“The aw-dumb what?” Ritardando asked.

“The Autumn Apple Fair. Every fall there's a big fair near the town celebrating the apple harvests. A lot of money is exchanged, and I mean *a lot*.” She said. “I've been trying to find a way to get in on the business for years, and I think I might've found something. I've been working on apple cider. Care to try some?”

“I'm underage...” Ritardando said. He then saw an expression on her face that he was more accustomed to seeing on Raincloud's. “Or maybe not.” He said, taking a sip.

“I think I might be onto something here,” Gold Standard said, half to herself. “If I can just... just...” The confidence fell from her face. “Ugh, it's not going to work. There's bound to be tons of ponies selling cider, and my wares aren't going to make a dent in anyone else's sales. I don't know how I can possibly compete with the Delicious brothers.”

“Huh?” Ritardando asked, thinking of cannibalism.

“Red Delicious and Gold Delicious,” Goldie said, pacing. “They’re from the Apple family, the owners of the biggest orchards. Every year, they come in with their big fancy apple-wagons and their big fancy apple pies and my shop is left completely vacant for the entire fair. Even when I try to set up a booth in the actual fair, I never get back the money it costs to set up the booth in the first place.” She was growing more and more frustrated. “Apple cider,” she muttered, disbelieving. “As if that’d be the winning strategy. I barely know how to make it-”

“I thought it tasted good...”

Gold Standard spun around angrily, “well of course *you* would-” she broke off, seeing the colt’s startled reaction. “I’m sorry,” she said, trying to calm down. “It’s just I’ve been trying to do it for years, and it just frustrates me. I just can’t get it to work.”

“It was like that with me, once,” Ritardando said, “with the guitar. Then I realized it didn’t have strings.”

Gold Standard, like many ponies, had absolutely no response to that, just staring as he ate his cereal.

“Well, after we have breakfast, we’ll open shop.”

They entered into the shop after they had their cereal. “Well,” Gold Standard said, “I’m going to need a bit of help from you.” She said, using magic to lift a large crate near the counter. “A very special Friday ritual.” She placed the crate down and then instead raising a crowbar.

“And...” Ritardando said, “what do I do?”

“Stand by the door.” She pried off the top of the crate.

Ritardando jumped as he heard banging on the front door. He turned and looked – dozens of little colts and fillies with eager-looking faces. It had been a crate of candy.

“I want you to stand by the door and just keep an eye. Ready?” her horn started to glow.

“Huh?”

And then the door was open and Ritardando was nearly trampled by all of the foals.

After managing to get his bearings, he just stood there, vacant expression, watching all the foals buying candy. After about twenty minutes, they’d all gone.

“So, um,” Ritardando said.

“Every Friday we get a new shipment of candy.” Goldie explained. “And all the foals come and get it. I should really consider selling more and opening a little candy bar here - it’s very lucrative and I think it might make the store seem a little more inviting...”

There was a sound from outside that sounded like a foal was upset.

“Oh no...” Goldie said.

“What?” Ritardando said, walking over to the door.

“Bullies...” Goldie said. “The foals buy the candy, and then the bullies come along and try to take it from them.”

Ritardando stood there for a while. “Say...” he said, a grin appearing on his face. “I have an idea.”

“An id...” Goldie said, almost surprised by the prospect, but definitely surprised by the fact that Ritardando had merrily waltzed out of the store.

Turning a corner, he found just the thing – three young bullies, the mass of children cowering before them. One of the bullies was a unicorn, using magic to hold the candy over them.

“That all of it?” the leader, an earth pony, asked.

“I think so,” said the unicorn.

“Any of you pipsqueaks hiding any?” the third, a pegasus, asked. “You’d better not, or you’ll be in for a load of hurt.”

The younger foals cringed.

“Excuse me,” said Ritardando, but in a different tone of voice than usual – his vowels weren’t dragged out, but were sharp and to the point. He sounded like some kind of suave British mastermind. “I can’t help but hear the ruckus.”

“Yeah, what of it?” the young earth pony asked.

“Nothing, nothing,” Ritardando said, “just that it seemed like you were being a little... mean, to this young foals. You see...” he lowered his head to him, “it wouldn’t be very nice if there were some big foals making trouble for little foals, now, would it?”

The bullies were starting to lose their tough guy acts, what with the big black pony with a scary deep voice being all intimidating on them.

“Hey...” said the pegasus, hovering in front of him, “aren’t you that retard who stacks boxes?”

“Why, yes, my little pony,” Ritardando said, a sinister grin crossing his face, “I do stack boxes. Do you know why?”

The pegasus sank to the ground.

“There are secrets in those boxes,” Ritardando said in a voice that was almost whispering, “dark secrets only known to the few of us. Dark secrets that guard, for example, that candy. So I think that you three should have a little more respect for it, and pay for it with your own money rather than grubbing it off of these honest foals. Do I make myself clear?”

The unicorn was trying to save face, but he’d let up his spell holding up the candy. “He’s bluffing. Take this!” he said, and shot a bolt of magic out of his horn.

Ritardando blinked, and then wiggled his nose a bit. The unicorn wasn’t breathing, waiting to see what would happen. Ritardando turned his focus back to the unicorn, and leaned in. “That tickled.” He said.

The bullies turned tail and ran, as the younger foals quickly gathered up their candy. Ritardando turned around and walked majestically back into the shop, his head held high, to a dumb-struck Gold Standard.

After he walked in and closed, the door, however.

“AAAAGH! My nose!” he yelped, the suave accent dropping. “My nose my nose my nose my nose my nose...” He repeated as Goldie led him into the kitchen.

“Hold still,” she said, holding an ice pack up to his nose.

“Ahh!” he yelped again, jumping back. “That’s cold!”

“Of course it’s cold, it’s an ice pack,” she said, trying to regain her patience. “What was that you just did?”

Ritardando managed to put up with the ice on his nose. “Well, the bullies were scaring the foals, so I thought... why not scare them? I mean, I’ve got a deep voice, and I can make it sound all intimidating, and, well...”

“Dark secrets that guard this candy?” Goldie asked, laughing, “now there’s an idea. I could use that as a marketing gimmick. You okay?”

“Uh-huh.” Ritardando said, nodding.

The bell rang, indicating someone entering into the shop.

“Well, let’s go. Can’t leave a customer waiting,” said Gold Standard as they entered back into the shop.

It was Raincloud, looking a little impatient.

“Oh hi!” Ritardando said, apparently recovered from whatever was the matter with his nose. “You here for kite-making supplies again?”

“Huh?” Goldie asked.

Raincloud’s eyes narrowed, walking over to the newspaper stand near the counter. “No. I’m just here for the paper.”

“Um...” Ritardando said, thinking. “Ohhhh, *that* paper.”

“Are you feeling alright?” Goldie asked.

“I doubt it has anything to do with the bump on his head,” Raincloud said, taking the paper and placing a bit on the counter. “Hm. Some young mare in Cloudsdayle pulled off a Sonic Rainboom...” she said casually, flipping through the pages.

“His nose, actually... I heard about that, too. I had a hard time believing it.” Goldie said. She noticed Raincloud’s lack of interest. “I take it you’re not into sports?”

“I’m unlikely to be impressed by anything involving rainbows.” Raincloud responded.

“Y’know, why are there so many songs about rainbows...” Ritardando mused. “I’m gonna grab my guitar!” And before Raincloud could object, he had run up the stairs.

“Thanks for the paper,” Raincloud said hastily, grabbing the paper and leaving.

Ritardando ran back down, guitar hanging from his neck. “Where’d she go?” he asked. Surprisingly, he caught onto what happened. Unsurprisingly, he barreled out the door after her.

“Ritardando, wait!” Goldie shouted afterwards. She ran after him, worried that nothing good would come out of this.

“Raincloud, wait!” Ritardando said. “I think I’ve got a song!”

Unfortunately, Raincloud’s already-limited patience had run out. “No, Ritardando.” She said, turning around. “I’m not interested. I have a headache.”

“Music can’t give you a headache!”

“Try me,” Raincloud said sarcastically.

“Okay!” Ritardando said, not getting it and preparing the guitar.

“No!” she said. “Listen, I’m not interested. I don’t *care*. No pony cares. No pony *likes it*. Besides, I just said I don’t like rainbows.”

Ritardando stood there, frozen, his open-mouthed facial expression not changing, as though he wasn’t sure how to process Raincloud’s remark.

“So... no songs about rainbows?”

“No songs in general.” Raincloud said. “There are other towns that do regularly scheduled musical numbers. Not here.”

Ritardando looked around. A few ponies had stopped to watch the scene. Not participating, as Ritardando might’ve hoped (provided they supported his side), just watching. He saw Gold Standard, with a seemingly pained expression, as though she were pleading with him to get back inside before it got worse.

“But it’s a good song...”

“No! Don’t you get it?” Raincloud asked. “Ughh, you’re so *annoying*. You’re like a big black balloon with a dopey grin painted on. And the balloon won’t shut up.”

It took a bit for Raincloud’s words to really sink in for him. When they did, that grin of his twitched a bit, and he stepped back.

“You... you’re wrong.” Ritardando said, back into the shop, trying to sound confident. “I’m going to... start a band! And then we’re going to perform, and then it’s going to be so awesome that it blows your *mind*.”

Goldie followed him inside, and the crowd dispersed, save for Raincloud, who wondered if she was a little too mean to him. Well, he seemed like he was still set on the whole music thing, she figured, so he couldn’t have been too broken up about it. Then she decided to read the funnies.