

They never had a chance. She was simply too good. Two armies, one of black and one of white, stood on opposite sides, fighting with all their might. A knight swiftly rode past a slew of charging enemy soldiers, the hole in their defensive line unnoticed. She grinned. This was exactly the opportunity she needed. With naught but a soft gasp, the lone soldier left to protect the space fell, and the war was over. Checkmate.

“Bad move, Fluttershy,” Twilight said. “Good game though.”

Time in the café seemed to stop for Fluttershy, everything but the pieces on the black and white squares of the chessboard completely forgotten. She had looked at every single solitary move, twice even. Her king was still pinned down, yet maybe that knight, maybe the bishop, maybe her queen could still save her. Analyzing her position, Fluttershy quickly stuck out a hoof to move her queen, but brought it back just as fast.

“Nope,” Twilight said with a hint of smugness.

“But what if I...” Fluttershy placed a hoof over her knight.

“Nope.”

Fluttershy hung her head in defeat. “Darn.”

“Oh Fluttershy, it’s nothing to get upset over. You’ll be even better next time.”

“...but I’ll never be as good as you, Twilight.”

Twilight shot her a winning grin. “Practice makes perfect.”

Sure. It’d been four weeks since they started meeting on weekends at Twilight’s insistence, and Fluttershy wasn’t any closer to beating Twilight than when she started. What little remnants of hope she had left after her first defeat at Twilight’s hooves slowly began dissipating into nothingness as the losses racked up. First one, then two, twelve, forty-nine, a hundred— it was enough to get even the most chipper of ponies in a foul mood.

There was a long silence between the two, neither making eye contact until Twilight finally decided to speak up.

“Well, if you really want to improve, I have some game books in the library that I could give you. They’re a bit hard to read, though.”

Fluttershy didn’t respond. Her gaze was fixed on a golden flier taped to the white walls of the restaurant. It read: Come to the First Annual Ponyville Chess Tournament at Sugarcube Corner and have a chance at besting The Black Queen! A thousand bits for first place! Three hundred

for second and two hundred for third!

“In fact, I have several books just for reading those books. The How-to-Read Books books, real great stuff. If you find those a bit too challenging, I always have the How-to-Read Books Books books collection. Establish a foundation for learning, you know? I even—”

Twilight stopped once she realized what Fluttershy was staring at. Twilight’s pupils dilated, panic-stricken. “The Black Queen? Here, in Ponyville? How could I have been so unprepared? I have to study now before it’s too late!” Twilight took a book roughly the size of her forearm out from under their game table, and slammed it down, reading furiously. The table shook violently, causing a score of pieces to plummet to their untimely demise with a soft “clink.” Deciding that Advanced Openings for Advanced Ponies was simply not enough, Twilight produced another book, The History of Chess, a Compendium of Every Move Ever Made with Historical Attributions, which was thicker than a tree trunk. She at first struggled to place it on the table without knocking over the first book. This proved to be a futile effort, as the table and its contents collapsed to the floor the instant it was put down. Sawdust spewed upward, coating the two in a thin veneer.

“Uh... Ma’am? Your order,” a scrawny waiter said, presenting a daffodil sandwich on a small platter. His face contorted into a grimace as he examined the remnants of the table.

Twilight paid him no heed, crouching on the floor to view the books. “Ah, the Sicilian, wonderful opening, a favorite of the grandmasters.” The sawdust still stuck in her mane, which she clawed at, giving her mane a unkempt look. This did not help alleviate the waiter’s concern.

“She’s, uh, a bit ‘busy’ at the moment. She gets like that sometimes. I’ll take that off your hooves for now.” Fluttershy smiled absentmindedly.

The waiter blushed. He wasn’t used to customers doing him favors. He did what he was told, but Twilight grabbed him before he could make his escape to the side of the restaurant where there weren’t crazy ponies.

“Does my mane look all right?” Twilight asked insistently.

“Wha?”

“I said, does my mane look good?” This time her voice was borderline desperate.

“I’m really not the kind of guy you should ask about that. Maybe she could help you.” He pointed to Rarity, who had just entered the restaurant for her afternoon lunch.

Twilight rushed over to Rarity with what would have been the speed of a jaguar, but the two books she carried slowed her pace to that of a turtle, even with her magic to assist her. The

entire restaurant seemed to shake as she moved step-by-step across the ceramic tiles.

“RARITY! AM I BEAUTIFUL?”

Rarity’s eyes widened. Judging from her expression, she knew that Twilight was having one of “those” days and had already scratched “have lunch” off her mental to-do list. The bell on the front door chimed, and she was gone.

“Wait! I need your help!” Twilight chased after her, displaying a surprising degree of nimbleness, considering she was carrying roughly a metric ton of paper. As the hoofsteps faded, the restaurant returned to its previously peaceful atmosphere. The waiter tiptoed away slowly, hoping that he could return to the sane side as soon as possible.

“Wait,” Fluttershy said.

The waiter’s shoulders slumped as he stopped mid-step. At least the crazy one was gone. He took a deep sigh and turned to face Fluttershy, giving his best smile.

“How can I help, ma’am?”

“Who’s that?” Fluttershy pointed at the picture of The Black Queen on the poster, which now lay on the floor. The picture displayed a figure cloaked in a white robe decorated with black chess pieces. A hood obscuring its face, the only visible feature a sinister yellow glow of eyes.

“Don’t you read the news, lady? That’s the new Canterlot Chess Champion. Rumor has it that she always wears a cloak like that one, and hardly ever shows her face.”

“Spooky.”

“Yeah, chess is big up in Canterlot. If she’s the new champ, she’s probably the best in all of Equestria.”

“Mmmhmm...” Fluttershy said as she munched on the daffodil sandwich that Twilight had left behind. The waiter stared at her expectantly. “Well, uh, thanks for the information.” She nibbled at the final bits of Twilight’s sandwich before sliding the platter back to the waiter.

“Ma’am, there still is the matter of your bill...” the waiter said hesitantly, almost too nervous to continue. He took a deep breath, gulping for a few more mouthfuls of air. “...and my tip.”

Faint hues of red painted Fluttershy’s face as her ears drooped. “I... don’t have any money,” she said, her bottom lip quivering in anticipation of the inevitable reprimand. No money meant that she’d have to work it off, which meant that she probably would have to pay off the table as well, and who knew how much a whole table cost? Mohagany was hard to come by in these

parts. She'd be there forever. Fluttershy pictured it in her mind. All the bunnies would be lonely without their friend Fluttershy to keep them company. Who'd help the birds nest? Who would take care of Angel? A thousand thoughts ran through Fluttershy's mind until something the waiter said snapped her back to reality.

"...and that's fine, because you two come here so often that you've got a running tab set up."

The words were music to Fluttershy's ears. "Oh thank you, thank you, thank you! You have no idea how much this means to me. Angel would be so lonely without me."

"Oh, no problem. Your tab currently stands at... five hundred bits, due at the end of next week," the waiter said, slowly backing away. He waited for the inevitable meltdown to occur.

All the color in Fluttershy's face drained instantly. For the longest moment, the two stood in complete silence, Fluttershy on the verge of breaking down into tears all the while. Her breath became very ragged, and she struggled just to breathe, her lungs devoid of air.

Eventually, she managed to utter, "D-did you say... f-five hundred bits?" That was more than she made in a month, more than she made in two months. She didn't know anypony with that much money on hoof, and certainly anypony that would give it away. First they'd take the house, then they'd take Angel and send him to a foster home for bunnies with deadbeat caretakers. It'd be so embarrassing that she wouldn't even have the heart to ask her friends to take her in. Then there'd be no one who remembered poor old Fluttershy, living as an exile for the rest of her life. Out of the frying pan and into the fire, Fluttershy thought glumly.

Twilight paced back and forth in front of the massive chessboard set up on the library's floor, making sure not to step on the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of books on chess theory that littered the area. Her game had to be perfect to best The Black Queen, and that required discipline. She picked up a chessboard poster and taped it to the wall, producing a ruler to use as a pointer.

"Atten-shun, b1 knight! When The Black Queen plays the Alekhine's Defense, what will you do?"

The knight did not respond.

"Correct! And what will you do when pinned to the king?"

The knight said nothing.

"Exactly! You could learn a thing or two from b1 knight, f2 pawn!"

The pawn looked bitter, almost ashamed that her name had been singled-out. She stifled a

sniffle, rubbing her eyes. All the others stared at her; it must have been terribly embarrassing to be such a failure. The f1 bishop gave her a pat on the back.

“Look at what you did to poor Twist!” Scootaloo, the h1 rook, said. “You made her cry!”

“Forget it, no amount of extra credit Cheerilee gives us is worth this,” Sweetie Belle, the queen, said. “I’m leaving.”

“Wait! I have so many other openings to go over with you. We haven’t even started talking about all the variations of the King’s Indian Attack that can be played!” Twilight said.

“Nuh-uh, Twilight. We’ve been here for hours, and all y’all has done is spout a buncha hooey about openin’s nopony knows or cares about. I’m gettin’ outta here,” Applebloom, the g1 knight, said.

The other schoolfills nodded in agreement and filed out the door, Twist still sobbing as she left. Twilight scoffed. Kids just weren’t interested in chess nowadays. Why? Such a beautiful game of strategy shouldn’t be an elderly pony’s pastime. With an exasperated grunt, Twilight started cleaning up the mess that was her home.

“You know, I bet they’d like the game a bit more if you didn’t, I don’t know, make it a chore to play? Games are supposed to be fun, right?” Spike, the king, said.

Twilight didn’t answer. Spike sighed.

“I know you’re trying because you like the game, but you can’t force others to like it too.”

For a baby dragon, Spike was awfully perceptive.

“You don’t understand, Spike. If Ponyville doesn’t perform well, there might not be another chess tournament!” Twilight threw the ruler to the ground. “And if there’s not another chess tournament, who am I going to play with?”

At that moment, Fluttershy opened the door.

Fluttershy had picked up her chessboard and bolted from the café as fast as she could, heading for Twilight’s. She wasn’t home. According to Spike, Twilight was at Rarity’s. According to Rarity, she was at Sugarcube Corner. According to Pinkie Pie, she had gone to Sweet Apple Acres. According to Applejack, she had gone to the school, and according to Cheerilee, she had gone back home. By the time she finally got back to Twilight’s, half the day had passed.

She stopped in front of the library tree and caught her breath, steeling herself for the confrontation to come. Oh hey, Twilight, yeah, you know that restaurant you did all the damage

to? Yeah, that one. Well, we owe them five hundred bits in back payment, and it's due by next week. Good luck getting Celestia to cough that much money up. Fluttershy imagined that would be when she fainted, then she'd have Spike fetch a doctor. The medical bills would stack up on top of their unpaid tab, and Twilight would be a deadbeat just like her. Wonderful. But it was Twilight's responsibility just as much as it was hers, so she had to be told about it, lest her home be taken as well.

A score of fillies came barging out of the front door, much to Fluttershy's confusion.

"Can you believe that? She's crazy I tell you," Scootaloo said.

"What's going on here, girls?" Fluttershy asked, taking note of the sobbing Twist.

"Oh nuthin', Miss Fluttershy, just Twilight bein' nuttier than a fruitcake again," Applebloom said.

"Do fruitcakes even have nuts?" Sweetie Belle asked. "They're fruitcakes. Why would they have nuts?"

"They do, quite a lot of nuts actually," Fluttershy said meekly. "So, uh, what happened to Twist?"

"Oh, uh... nothing," Scootaloo said, clasping a hoof over Twist's mouth before the group scattered. "Have fun talking to Twilight, Fluttershy!"

Fluttershy stood there, alone, for a few seconds. What just happened? She shook her head. Slowly, she crept to the door, cracking it open with the gentlest of pushes. As she stepped through the doorway, she heard Spike's voice.

"Don't you have Fluttershy?"

Then Twilight's.

"Yes, but she'll never be as good as The Black Queen. She's just a novice, Spike. She hasn't even beat me once in all the weeks we've been playing."

The door behind Fluttershy made a loud creaking noise as she let it slide shut.

Twilight spun around to face her. "Fluttershy!"

Spike slowly crept upstairs without as much as a peep.

Fluttershy wasn't sure how to react, so she just let it all loose. "Twilight, you messed up the café, didn't pay for lunch when you said you'd treat me, accrued a tab of five hundred bits' worth of back-pay, made small fillies cry, and now you're bad-talking me?! What's gotten into you?" Fluttershy heaved in exasperation. "sorry..."

Twilight's ears drooped in shame. "I'm sorry, Fluttershy. That was wrong of me. But I must not have heard you right. You said five hundred bits?"

"Uh, yes. But I think I..."

Twilight's expression changed to something Fluttershy recognized all too well, the face of a pony that's been pushed to their absolute emotional limits, and just can't deal with the stress anymore.

"Fluttershy! We don't have that kind of money! I can't go to the Princess for unpaid debts! What would she think? She'd probably find another number one student after hearing about the 'Twilight Sparkle Scrounger Scandal.' What are we going to do? They'll take both our homes as collateral!"

"Twilight, I—"

"Who'll take care of the books when I'm gone? Nobody cleans their dust jackets with as much love as I do! They'll be so lonely without me!"

"Twilight, there's a—"

"And who will take care of Spike? I mean, taking care of a baby dragon is expensive, and without any money—"

"Twilight!" Fluttershy yelled.

"Oh, sorry."

"As I was saying, I happened to find this." Fluttershy held up one of the posters for the chess tournament, which was in six days. "If we both win second and third place, we can pay back the money."

Twilight grinned so wide that her lips stretched to the far ends of her cheeks. She got up, retrieved a record labelled Training Montages: Study Edition, and placed it in the record player. "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's study!"

The next few days passed incredibly slowly. Brutality was the name of Twilight's training routine, and Fluttershy had read nearly the entire library of books in that time, not even sparing time to sleep or rest. They played more and more, Fluttershy steadily improving as she read and practiced.

A white queen, regal and elegant in poise, stood in the middle of board. A crafty black bishop

used the cover provided by his comrades to pin her to her lover, the king. Glued to the spot because of her affection to the king, and unable to move another soldier in to help, the queen valiantly charged forward, taking the bishop with her as the pawns ended her spree. Yet, her sacrifice was in vain; the king was still trapped, and he too would be gone after the enemy moved.

“Wow, good move Fluttershy!” Twilight said, knocking her king over. “I resign.”

“Yes!” Fluttershy’s hoof shot up in the air in triumph. “uh... I mean, yay.”

“You’re getting good, Fluttershy. Really good.”

Fluttershy beamed. “I am?”

“You just saw how you mopped the floor with me. Tell me you’re not getting better.”

She giggled. “I guess I am!”

Twilight reset the board, making sure that each piece was in its proper place. She frowned. With a sigh, she made her first move.

“Twilight, what’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing.”

But her face told a different story.

“Twilight,” Fluttershy said in a pouty voice.

“Fine. It’s just that you’ve gotten so good, and I haven’t improved at all. I feel like all this training has done nothing for me. Maybe I should just give up.”

“Oh Twilight, it’s nothing to get upset over. You’ll do better next time.” Fluttershy said, playfully.

Twilight stared blankly at Fluttershy, shocked at having her own words thrown in her face. She grinned. “Sage advice. Come on, we got a competition to win, and a queen to dethrone!”

Fluttershy returned the smile.

Pinkie Pie evidently had taken part in decorating, as chess-styled party paraphernalia were scattered about Sugarcube Corner: streamers, confetti, even a “chess” cannon in the corner. Fluttershy hoped that it didn’t shoot chess pieces. A dozen chessboards sat on tables that lined the walls, creating a path leading up to an ornate triple-decker gold trophy with a queen

centerpiece. There were a lot more ponies here than Fluttershy had expected; at least thirty ponies milled about the lobby.

"Hello there girls, planning to compete?" Mrs. Cake said, approaching the two, holding a small clipboard.

"Why, yes we are," Twilight said cheerily. "Where's Pinkie Pie?"

"Oh, we left her to take care of the kids." She shot a look to her husband. "Wouldn't want her to spoil the event, now would we, dear?"

Mr. Cake nodded enthusiastically. "Yes ma'am. As the official director of this here tournament, I wouldn't want any player to be distracted by, uh, her 'antics.' Orientation will be starting in a few minutes, don't be late!" Mr. Cake shuffled his notes and took off towards the podium next to the trophy.

"So, girls, the entry fee would usually be around ten bits, but because of a very generous donation from one 'The Black Queen,' the tournament stays free for everypony!" Mrs. Cake said. "I'll just put you down on the registration list."

Twilight looked both relieved because they didn't need to spend any more money, and confused. "Why would she do that?"

"She said she plays to play. Apparently she comes from a rich Canterlotian family, as she's the one who financed this entire setup."

"That's... nice of her," Fluttershy said.

"Yes, yes it is. We get all the advertisement and none of the cost. It's simply lovely," Mrs. Cake said.

A tall figure cloaked in a white robe adorned with black chess pieces stepped behind Mrs. Cake. "It's all in a day's work, Mrs. Cake." Her voice was genteel, definitely a member of the Canterlot aristocracy, yet there was something off about it. It sounded as if she were speaking through her hoof, all her sounds were slightly muted and warped. Her robe covered her body completely, and her face was but a silhouette underneath her hood.

Mrs. Cake froze, then slowly turned around to face The Black Queen. "Thank you very much for what you're doing."

The Black Queen nodded. "It's the least I could do to bring the wondrous world of chess to Ponyville. Now if you'll excuse me, I believe orientations are starting." She walked off towards the podium.

Mr. Cake took out a microphone and began speaking, "Ahem, registration is now officially over! Hello, I'm Mr. Cake, and this is my beautiful wife." He took a photograph out of his wallet before realizing that she was standing right next to him. "She's a keeper, isn't she?"

The crowd nodded awkwardly in agreement. Mrs. Cake cut in before her husband could be of any more embarrassment. "Welcome to the First Annual Ponyville Chess Tournament! We'll be your directors for the day. My lovely husband here will explain the rules." She gave him a hard nudge.

"We play standard rules: five games, fifty minutes each. Who you play in the first round will be randomly selected, then winners play winners and losers play losers. Each player will have a score sheet to write down their moves as they play. This is mandatory. The one who has the best record after five matches will be our champion and take home this fabulous trophy!" He gestured to the massive trophy that sat next to the podium. "And a cash prize of a thousand bits, generously given to us by The Black Queen!" He gestured to the cloaked figure standing in the corner of the room.

The crowd oohed and awed. The Black Queen removed her hood, and the crowd gasped in shock. Behind the mask was the face of a beautiful alabaster unicorn, her mane an exquisite pink.

"I feel that it is necessary to drop the façade, and let the ponies of Ponyville know me for who I am, put a face to the name. It would be dishonest to do otherwise. Now that you know who I am, and I know who you are, I'll let our director continue," she said, putting the hood back over her face. She gestured for Mr. Cake to continue.

"Second and third place also receive cash prizes along with trophies. There are several rules to chess that are exclusive to tournament play..."

Fluttershy listened to Mr. Cake drone about the rules, but didn't pay much attention. Twilight, on the other hoof, was furiously scribbling notes. She raised her hoof.

"Excuse me, what happens if a player makes an illegal move putting them in check while touching a pawn that can be moved, but it isn't figured out until later because the player didn't see the move because he or she forgot about en passant and didn't know that a pawn could work that way, but the game has already progressed a good number of moves, and what happens to their clock time?"

Fluttershy could see Mr. Cake mentally process the information. He counted on his hooves, shook his head, and looked to his wife in desperation. She shrugged. Fortunately, The Black Queen spoke up before the dead air could become an awkward silence.

"The players reset their position to when the error was made with time granted to compensate

for the rest of the game. The player has to move the piece they touched if it can be moved legally.”

“Oh, that’s interesting. Thanks!” Twilight said.

Mr. Cake looked at Twilight a bit apprehensively. “If there are no further questions, we’d like to announce the pairings for the first round. None? All right then.”

Mr. Cake announced the first round pairings, Fluttershy was set to play Big Mac, and Twilight was paired up against The Black Queen herself. When Twilight heard “The Black Queen versus Twilight Sparkle” she nearly fainted. The tournament had just started, and things were already going wrong. It was all Fluttershy could do not to cry out in frustration, but one pony assuming the fetal position on the floor was probably enough for one chess tournament.

The Black Queen approached Twilight. “Our table is over there, table number one. For the best, I assume.” She chuckled. “I’ve heard a great deal about you, Twilight Sparkle. Let’s see if you’re as smart as they say.”

Twilight laughed nervously along with her. “Yes, let’s. Good luck on your game, Fluttershy!” she said with some enthusiasm before going into a full-fledged slump. The walk to the board was going to be one of the longest walks of her life.

Fluttershy watched as her friend left, then took her seat at table number twelve. Big Mac was already seated and had set the board along with the clock.

“You, uh, ready to play?” Fluttershy asked.

“Eeeyup.”

They had been overwhelmed by her strength. All the king’s loyal soldiers, even his beloved wife, had been captured or done away with. Standing at the center of the board, surrounded by enemies, the king did the only thing he could: raise the white flag.

“I resign,” Twilight said, depressed. She tipped over her king and stopped her clock.
“Congratulations, you win.”

“Do not despair, Twilight Sparkle, for you played a most excellent game. When you’ve had as much time as I to study the intricacies of chess, you know the ins and outs of the game almost as a second nature,” The Black Queen replied.

“But I’ve studied chess my entire life, how can I still lose?”

The Black Queen chuckled. “So have I.”

Twilight gave herself a moment to calm herself. Sure, she lost the first round, but she could at least win the rest of her rounds and snag second place. They only needed second and third place to pay back the tab, but Twilight's mind had already formed delusions of grandeur. There would have been a trophy, press conferences, and a thousand bits that could go a long way. Now that dream was crushed. She took a deep breath, put on her best smile, and spoke one last time to The Black Queen.

"I learned a lot from playing you. Thank you for that."

"You're welcome, Twilight Sparkle," The Black Queen said as she left.

Twilight sat at her board, going over the game in her mind. Sighing, she reset the board and went to check on Fluttershy's game.

Big Mac had been, using the term lightly, absolutely crushed. His side of the board was a mess of poorly positioned pawns and not much else. Fluttershy had taken nearly every major piece and was just about to finish him off. Sweating nervously, Big Mac pushed one of his pawns, a move which proved to be a horrendous blunder. Fluttershy capitalized on it, forcing her queen right in Big Mac's face. There was nowhere his king could run.

"Checkmate. Good game, Big Mac."

"Uh, Eeeyup." Big Mac blushed, embarrassed. "I think you'll find a trail-hand like myself a bit too green for yer tastes, little lady."

"Oh, it's okay, at least you tried," Fluttershy said.

Big Mac nodded.

"Fluttershy! That was amazing!" Twilight exclaimed. "You just completely trounced Big Mac, one of the best chess players in Ponyville!"

Big Mac's blush became even more pronounced. Considering that the guy was already red, he must have been pretty darn embarrassed to get any redder.

"I wouldn't say that, Twilight. He played a good game."

Twilight watched as Big Mac crept away in humiliation. She took a mental note to watch what she said from now on.

"Well, it's good that you won your first game, because I lost mine," she said. "The Black Queen is good, Fluttershy. Too good."

“It’s okay, Twilight. We can still win that money.”

“I don’t think you understand, Fluttershy. She crushed me. I’ve never had that happen before.”

“It’ll be all right, Twilight. You learned something, right?”

Twilight nodded.

Fluttershy grinned. “Then we’re making progress.”

Mr. Cake spoke into the microphone, “The next match begins in one minute. Please move to the lobby for pairing announcements.”

“I guess it’s time to buck up, sit down, and win some games,” Twilight said.

The players crowded into the lobby and listened patiently as Mr. Cake called off their names.

“Fluttershy gets a bye this round, which is an automatic win for those silly ponies that weren’t paying attention earlier. Carrot Top plays Bon-Bon, and Twilight Sparkle plays Big Mac.”

There was a heavy groan heard from the within crowd. A deep baritone said, “I just can’t win today.”

“Checkmate!” Twilight said, cheerily. A victory like this was just what her confidence needed after that humiliating defeat.

Big Mac smacked a hoof against the table. “Why can’t I win?” He seemed to shrink inwardly, ears drooped. He looked at the board, disappointed. “I used ta be good at this game. Granny Smith always said I was her little chess champion.”

“Big Mac, I’ve been studying chess all my life, and the last few days I’ve been studying harder than I ever have before. There’s nothing to be ashamed about.”

His face brightened. “Mayhap you’re right, Twilight. That bein’ said, I think I’ll see myself outta this here tournament. Too many high-rollers for my tastes, and I ain’t gonna be some punching bag. I’ll seeya later.” Big Mac stood from his chair and was gone without another word.

Twilight watched him go. Ponies took this game too gosh darn seriously.

Mr. Cake announced the third round match. This time Twilight got the bye, and Fluttershy was paired up against none other than The Black Queen. When Fluttershy heard her named announced, her reaction was that of Twilight’s, if it were multiplied by sixty-four. She clasped

onto Twilight like an oversized teddy-bear and refused to let go. It took the combined efforts of Mr. Cake and Mrs. Cake to pry her off, but as soon they released her, she clung back onto Twilight with the strength of a vice. They eventually got her off again, managing to get her seated on table number one in spite of her protests.

Unperturbed by her opponent's behavior, The Black Queen calmly and quietly took her seat. "Ready to play, Fluttershy?"

Fluttershy shook her head and pleaded to the Cakes one last time. "Please, think of the bunnies."

"Your financial problems do not affect the pairings in this tournament. Just sit down, relax, and play the game, deary," Mrs. Cake said.

"Financial problems?" The Black Queen perked up.

"Oh, it's nothing... I'll play the game now... sorry, for being such a spoil-sport," Fluttershy said.

"Good luck Fluttershy!" the Cakes chimed, as they walked off to the break room.

"Well, let's begin then," The Black Queen said.

And the game was on. Fluttershy played the best game of her life, nearly impeccable in strategy, but The Black Queen matched her move for move. She tried various gambits, all of them countered. When she thought she gained an upper hoof, The Black Queen took it back as soon as it came. Were the chess environment not supposed to be a quiet one, Fluttershy would have screamed in frustration. Fluttershy had one thing working for her though: she had more time than The Black Queen. The Black Queen took a calm, deliberate pace with her moves, even though she was almost out of time. Perhaps if she got careless, maybe, just maybe, Fluttershy could win this. She kept telling herself, she's not looking at the clock, you can do this, yet these felt like hollow words. As if she were simply deluding herself into accepting a lie.

Something was off. Fluttershy didn't know what, but as the game progressed onwards, it became clear that The Black Queen wasn't even remotely concerned about her time, which had dwindled to under a few minutes. Fluttershy considered it for a moment. If The Black Queen didn't speed up, she'd run out of time, but what if she wasn't concerned about running out of time? Fluttershy replayed her previous moves in her mind, but found nothing. She kept playing, eying the board warily.

As the time clicked down to under a minute on The Black Queen's clock, Fluttershy finally realized what was wrong: she had been in check for at least ten moves and had been moving illegally. A barely audible gasp managed to escape her. The Black Queen had been toying with her the entire time, and there was nothing she could do about it.

No doubt, The Black Queen saw the look on Fluttershy's face. She stopped the clock, raising a hoof to call the director. Fluttershy grimaced, knowing all too well what was about to happen. Mr. Cake navigated his way from the confection area over to Fluttershy's board. He took one look at the board and knew exactly what was wrong.

"How long?" he said.

"Since move thirty-seven," The Black Queen replied.

It was longer than Fluttershy thought; that was twenty moves ago.

Mr. Cake's face showed signs of conflicted interest, but he ruled in favor of the rules.

"Add twenty minutes to each of your times and start from move thirty-seven. Best of luck you two." He gave Fluttershy a look of pity and whispered, "I'm sorry."

No sooner had Mr. Cake completely wrecked her game that Fluttershy started breaking down into tears. There was no coming back from a hit like that. Sure, she had back what was essentially an even game, but to be denied victory when it was just within a minute, and her grasp, was nothing other than cruel.

"H-how, how could you?" Fluttershy asked, her voice little more than a whisper.

The Black Queen did not answer, keeping the time-honored chess decorum of remaining silent while playing. She made her moves, faster this time, with a shaking hoof.

The game continued, but Fluttershy played poorly; her heart wasn't in the game anymore. Minor losses grew into major losses, and soon she was completely overwhelmed by The Black Queen's attack.

Knowing that there was nothing in store for him but capture, the rook snapped off a salute to his king.

"It's been in honor serving you, sir, but now's the time to say goodbye," he said.

In the end, the rook did what he did best: charge forward. It was a shame to leave the old king like that, alone and vulnerable, yet there was no other choice. He took out an enemy bishop before a sea of soldiers freed him from the bonds of his loyalty forever.

All her major pieces were gone, leaving only a few pawns. Fluttershy groaned in disappointment. The Black Queen's position grossly trumped hers; she still had her knights, plus a rook. Defeat was inevitable— no amount of fancy playing could bail her out of this mess.

Fluttershy stuck out her hoof, and placed it over her king. Shaking, she knocked it over.

"I... resign," Fluttershy said.

Stopping the clock, The Black Queen stuck out her own hoof. "'Twas an excellent game, Fluttershy. I daresay it's the best I've played in who knows how long."

Because it was the polite thing to do, Fluttershy accepted the hoofshake. Yet, resentment plagued her heart. How dare you waste time just to toy with somepony, she thought. She said nothing, only stood up from her chair, and took the walk of shame back to the break room.

Twilight had been inside the break room, too anxious to watch Fluttershy play. There was no doubt in Twilight's mind that the chances of victory were at least twenty-three percent, give or take ten. As she saw her friend enter with slumped shoulders, ears drooped in defeat, and a face full of sadness, the probability decreased to something close to three percent.

"Come on, Fluttershy. We knew beating her was a long-shot anyways," Twilight said, giving Fluttershy the hug that she obviously needed. The embrace, while warm and comforting, was short-lived.

"...I know, but I was this close to winning." Fluttershy made a tiny space with her hooves. "She's just a... big meanie, Twilight. She was just messing with me half the game. Why, I have half the mind to—"

Before she could do anything though, Mr. Cake announced, "Pairings for round four will now be given!"

Twilight listened to the pairings and cringed in abject horror. Why couldn't fate let them win? The fourth round match paired Fluttershy against Twilight. The two exchanged a glance and sat down on their haunches, defeated, Fluttershy taking a deep sigh, and Twilight pounding at the floor until it hurt. Why must winning be such an obstinate goal?

"What'll we do?" Fluttershy asked.

Doing the calculations in her head, Twilight said, "We're doomed."

Signs of alarm crossed Fluttershy's face. "...What? W-why?"

"If I win, and you lose, you're out of the running for third place. If I lose, and you win, I'm out. If we draw, both of us could get third place, but that'd result in a sudden death match to decide who gets the actual prize. If we both don't place in second and third, we won't have enough money to pay off that tab. We're doomed."

“Well, maybe I can, uh, get Rarity to give us a two hundred bit loan if I win second place.”

“Psh, Rarity? She may be generous but she’s not—”

“Would one Ms. Twilight Sparkle along with one Ms. Fluttershy please go upstairs? There is somepony who wishes to talk to you,” Mr. Cake said.

“Somepony...” Fluttershy said.

“Wants to see us?” Twilight said.

The two ascended the stairwell on the lobby’s side and were met with a sign labeled: DO NOT OPEN AT ALL COSTS. CONTAINS ONE PINKIE PIE AND TWO FOALS. In smaller print it read: Please, for the love of Celestia and all things holy in world, do not open this Pandora’s Box unless expressly told to do so, and if you have been expressly told, it is best to ask for confirmation before opening. You may even want to ask for confirmation of the confirmation. The door behind the sign was covered in chains, padlocks, and other locking instruments of various sizes.

Twilight called down to the Cakes, “Are you sure about this?”

“Sure am, sweetie! Just turn the knob, those locks are just for show anyways,” Mrs. Cake called back.

Twilight slowly inched her hoof forward to turn the knob, but the door burst open without her consent. The interior of the room was positively coated with party equipment, even more so than the lobby below. An energetic Pinkie Pie greeted them with confetti and streamers.

“Oh hey Twilight! And you too, Fluttershy! Some weird ghost wanted to talk to you.” She produced a glass from somewhere. “Punch?”

“No thanks, Pinkie,” Twilight said. “A ghost?”

“A ghost?” Fluttershy shivered.

“Oh girls, not a real ghost, just some kook dressed like a ghost!” Pinkie said. “Doesn’t she know that Nightmare Night was months ago? Follow me!” Pinkie hopped cheerily, beckoning them with a hoof. The Cake foals, Pumpkin and Pound, were enjoying themselves, what with the many colorful objects scattered about to play with. Pinkie Pie opened another door, and behind it stood The Black Queen.

“Hello girls, I’ve wanted to speak with you privately for quite some time now,” The Black Queen said.

“Uh, why?” Twilight asked.

“Because I couldn’t help but overhear the problems of your current financial situation. I’d like to help.”

“...Uh, why?” Fluttershy said.

“Let’s just say I owe you all one.”

“Uh, why!” Pinkie Pie shouted, excited. “Oh, we’re not playing that game anymore, my bad.”

The Black Queen giggled. “Oh Pinkie Pie, thank you for letting me stay here for today, by the way.”

“No problemo, Luna! Though you should take off that silly bedsheet and makeup, you look ridiculous. And not in the good, funny way, kinda the way that makes Rarity go all ‘blah’ like this.” Pinkie deadpanned her face, taking a very serious tone, which was noticeably difficult for Pinkie to pull off.

Twilight and Fluttershy looked at Pinkie, then The Black Queen, then back to Pinkie. No, it couldn’t be. Must’ve just been a Pinkie slip. Still, it invited questioning.

“Luna?!” the two exclaimed.

“You mean you didn’t know? Come on, it was obvious!” Pinkie took notice of the look The Black Queen shot her. “Hehehe I guess not, sorry. Didn’t mean to spoil your costume party.”

The Black Queen took off her hood, and sure enough, it was Luna. Dumbfounded, Twilight tried to come up with something coherent to say, while Fluttershy stood there, shocked.

“But your voice... and the reputation...and the face... How did you?” Twilight managed to squeak out.

“Simple magic and natural talent,” Luna said. “I’ve been playing since I was a foal, and I never want to stop. Once I learned that Ponyville was devoid of chess enthusiasm, I knew I had to bring the game here. Such a wondrous town need not be without chess! The Black Queen is just a front to mask my identity. Celestia and I don’t want to be known in our talent spectrums for being Princesses. We want to be known for being the best at it. Accept no substitute. I would like to give you a gift I could not before with this financial aid: an opportunity to enjoy the game for what is it, instead of trying to win every time.” She handed Fluttershy a blank coffer’s check from the royal treasury, signed Princess Luna.

The knowledge lifted a great burden from Twilight's mind. "Oh thank you, you don't understand how much we need this money. But please, don't tell Celestia about it!" Twilight pleaded.

"My lips are sealed."

Twilight took a sigh of relief. Finally, a stroke of luck.

"Not to be a grumplestiltskin, but I think you two ought to leave," Pinkie said. "Pumpkin and Pound and I gotta lot of partying to do."

"Right." Fluttershy stared at Luna. "One day, when I'm better, we, uh, should have a rematch... if that's okay with you."

Luna laughed. "Of course, of course. Don't forget that this is just a loan though. One does not simply give away free money without asking something in return."

The two looked at Luna, the previous joy on their face replaced with dread. Their one hope, gone.

"W-when will you, um, need the money?" Fluttershy said.

"You'll know soon enough."

Fluttershy carried the check down the lobby stairs as if it were a ton of bricks. Every lucky break seemed to fall through. She'd have to take at least two jobs to pay this thing off in any sort of timely manner. With two jobs, she wouldn't have any time to clean her house, help the animals, or even sleep. Sooner or later, she'd get so overwhelmed from sleep deprivation and her filthy home that she'd snap, becoming a menace to everypony. The town would be so threatened by the rampaging Fluttershy that they'd have to band together to exile her. Then she would be a wandering vagrant, liked by nopony, living out the rest of her pathetic life friendless.

Sulking, Fluttershy loosened her death grip on the check, and it tumbled off the rafters, headed for a punchbowl on the snack table below. Fluttershy let out a gasp.

Twilight quickly grasped the check with her magic. "Fluttershy, you really should be more care—" Twilight's eyes caught something on the underside of the paper. Slowly but surely, a grin began to emerge on her face as she read. "Luna shouldn't play such mean tricks on us. She really had me worried there."

"...Uh, what?" Fluttershy said.

Twilight showed Fluttershy the short message scrawled on the blank side of the check.

Dear Fluttershy and Twilight,

Does the price of two games sound like fair compensation?

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and many more!

...Is everyone gone? Good. I'd also like to thank Nicknack for helping me edit large portions of this story and giving slightly positive compliments.