

Author's Note: Many thanks to the fan that submitted Honey Buns and allowed me some creative input on additional characters based around her to create a theme that I enjoyed working with. Looking forward to the next and last Hope's Point chapter, Chapter Twenty-Nine, and the fan-submitted ponies that will appear there - Voltage Surge, Spark Plug, Gadget, and Crossfire.

CRISIS: Equestria

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Inebriation

Tick Tock, her muzzle half-buried by a slightly damp pillow, mumbled incoherently in her sleep. She stirred erratically, repositioning herself every few seconds, unable to find a comfortable position. Apart from the rustling of Tick Tock's bed sheets, her labored breaths, and her soft muttering, only the sound of Twilight Sparkle's soft, steady breathing broke the silence of the darkened hotel room.

A tapping noise at the door jolted Tick Tock awake with a start. She attempted to leap into a defensive position, but only managed to fall out of her bed. Her eyes darted around the room as she searched for the source of the disturbance. Seeing nothing, Tick Tock took a long, deep breath, satisfied that she was safe from any intruders.

"Blimey... that damn dream again," she muttered to herself, poking her scarred nose delicately as she did, "Get ahold of yourself girl, that monster's trapped in a force field miles away..."

Another slightly louder knock sounded from the door. Tick Tock swore under her breath as she tried to free herself from her blanket, but it caught her leg. With a thud, she tripped back onto the unforgiving floor. Muttering to herself, she hurried over to the door to answer it. Whoever was knocking was doing so quietly enough that it wouldn't wake the whole hotel, but Tick Tock could hear it just fine. She had always been a terribly light sleeper, but it had gotten much worse in the past week. She couldn't remember the last time she had gotten a solid two hours of sleep, much less a full night's rest.

"By the stars, keep your knickers... on?" she blurted as she pushed open the door.

Briarthorn waggled his eyebrows at her as she squinted into the hallway lights. "Mmmm, well don't you look just lovely. I'd been hoping you would put on the complementary pajamas, my dear *sublimey*," he murmured, "Nifty costume for the center stage, isn't it? Told you this place was high class. That looks better on you than your uniform does."

"For the love of- what in Equestria are you *doing here*?" she snorted, "Do you have *any* idea what time it is?" Briarthorn blinked for a moment and reached for his pocket, but Tick Tock

stopped him with an annoyed grunt. "It's four in the bloody morning, you twit!" she hissed as quietly as she could, "We're supposed to be getting sleep! Remember? Big long journey across Wastelands, nearly starved to death? Ring any bells?"

"Tickety, I'm legitimately sorry that I've gotta wake some of you up," he whispered sincerely with an apologetic bow, "I know I promised not to let anything interrupt your dreams, especially if they involved me, but... well. This might be bad. They're not telling me much, but the gist is..." He swallowed, and his voice became serious, almost frightened, "Down at the medical ward, there's a... situation, with Lockwood."

Tick Tock's expression drooped immensely. "Oh... oh dear, is something the matter? Stupid question, of course something is. He's not-"

Briarthorn frowned and shook his head. "... they haven't actually told me anything. He's not *dead*, so I'm not going to freak out just yet, but they're not telling me much at all. Only thing the doctors said was that they needed to speak to Twilight Sparkle, and *only* Twilight Sparkle. Since I'm sponsoring your stay, they asked me to take her there. Purply little thing still dreaming?"

"Of course she is, silly girl's a sound sleeper it seems. Maybe she's just really exhausted, I don't- wait. *Alone?*" Tick Tock narrowed her eyes at him. "This isn't some sort of-"

Briarthorn looked at Tick Tock with one part reproach and two parts sadness. "Hey, come on, Tick Tock, really? I've got copies of all your room keys." He flipped a pocket open and held up a key ring on the tip of his hoof. The keys' plated metal matched the hotel doors. Briarthorn sounded genuinely offended as he continued, his voice low but harsh. "If I'd wanted to bucking *abduct* one of you, it would be easy to do. This isn't New Pandemonium. Okay? Can you believe me on that one, please?"

Tick Tock took half a step back, her expression apologetic. "Right... right, this isn't New Pandemonium. I apologize, I'm just used to those sorts of ponies, grew up around too many of those types. You're not exactly helping your case any."

He sighed, "It's okay. Like you said, you're just used to it. But I'm dead serious here. The hospital asked me to retrieve Twilight, and I have no idea why. I know what I said about worrying and warts, but well... I'm pretty warty right now. Lockwood's not *dead*, they made that clear."

Tick Tock nodded. "Right. I'll get her for you, you wait here."

She walked back into the room proper and stepped over to Twilight's bed, where the other unicorn was still fast asleep and snoring quietly. Tick Tock was immensely glad to see that Twilight seemed to be having a very deep, pleasant sleep, and almost regretted having to wake her from it. For the past week, she'd only seen an expression of pain and worry on Twilight's

face as she slept. Whatever she was dreaming about, it must've been making her pretty happy.

She nudged Twilight's side with a hoof. "Twilight? Wake up, it's urgent." No response. Tick Tock grumbled and jostled her harder. "Twilight! Come off it, girl, wake up!"

Twilight swung her hooves around defensively. "Nmmmm..." she mumbled, "Spiiiike... five more minutes..."

"Spike?" Briarthorn rubbed his chin as he leaned in more closely. "Boyfriend?"

Tick Tock jumped in alarm and shot her head up to shoot an angry glare at Briarthorn. "Bloody *hell*, who invited you in? Get- urgh, whatever." She shook Twilight further. "Come on then, Twilight, get up!"

Twilight reached her hooves out and wrapped her hooves around Tick Tock, tugging her suddenly into a hug that twisted them towards Briarthorn. "Mmmm... thank you Tick Tock, the tea was lovely..."

Tick Tock turned red and tried to ignore the stallion's attempt to chuckle at their expense. "Aw, I wish I'd known you two were so close," he mocked gently, no fire behind his voice.

Flustered, Tick Tock flicked Twilight hard in the horn. "Twilight!"

Twilight jerked awake. "Ah! Wha- where?! Who?!"

She looked around herself in a panic, calming down as soon as she realized who was in her hooves. She then panicked again when she realized somepony was in her hooves. She jerked said hooves back, allowing Tick Tock to escape. The green unicorn coughed nervously, and Twilight sheepishly rubbed the back of her head as she sat up. She waved a tiny wave at Briarthorn as well, who politely returned it.

"Oh... hi Tick Tock, Briarthorn. What's going on? You two look worried."

"No time to talk, Twilight," Tick Tock said quickly, "Briarthorn here says that there's an issue at the hospital, involving Lockwood."

"W-what?" Twilight blinked, "Oh... oh dear. What's the matter? Nothing's happened to him has it?!"

"The doctors asked for you, Twilight. They won't tell me why," Briarthorn said simply, "It doesn't *outright* sound... *life-or-death*, but it sounded urgent."

"Go on, Twilight, get dressed," Tick Tock nodded, "Whatever's up, it doesn't sound

good.”

Twilight nodded in return and got out of the bed, heading over towards the wardrobe where she'd stored her cloak. Briarthorn watched her tugging at her pajamas with languid anticipation, until Tick Tock started shoving him out the door.

“*Hey*, come on,” he complained, “Have I stepped on any of *your* go-to coping mechanisms?”

“Nice try, flyboy,” Tick Tock stated firmly, “*You* can wait outside.”

Twilight finally had a chance to get a good feel for what exactly the major difference between Hope's Point and Canterlot really was, starting the moment she arrived at the subterranean sector of the city where the medical ward was located. When Briarthorn had mentioned that the important structures were located underground, she didn't think he really meant *deep* underground, but here they were. The sky and the shield were completely hidden by a massive cavern ceiling above them, hollowed out and kept steady with hundreds of thick metal beams and other support structures that criss-crossed throughout the dome-shaped cave. Something she recognized lit up the entire cavern, an Illumination spell, likely powered by techno-magic. The spell was typically very basic, something that unicorns would use to light up rooms in an emergency, but the strongest one she'd ever seen could barely light an area larger than the inside of Ponyville's Town Hall. This one, on the other hoof, was both large and bright enough to be considered more of an artificial *sun* than a lamp.

Twilight and Briarthorn had entered the underground through an opening several miles above this second city, completely skipping the elevator platform. Briarthorn, insisting they hurry against Twilight's minor protests, now carried her on his back and was flying her the rest of the way to their destination, his great wings rocking her comfortably to and fro. She noted that he was noticeably more secure compared to most other pegasi she'd ridden. Though, she had to admit, 'most other pegasi' usually meant Rainbow Dash, and very rarely Fluttershy, hence her apprehension to accepting in the first place.

“Wow... the underground city is easily the same size as the one up above...” she observed as she held tightly onto Briarthorn's neck, “I never imagined subterranean city-building could be this advanced.”

“And really, we haven't scratched the second surface,” Briarthorn explained, still committed to the role of her personal tour guide, “This is just the first underground layer. There are a few more, like what, two, three? Each one with all sorts of different infrastructures that mostly go into keeping that massive shield that keeps us all hunky-dory operational, amongst other things. This top layer just has crucial social structures like the hospital, residential

quarters, stuff like that. Civic planning, eh?" He turned his head slightly, sliding one of his eyes to look back at Twilight through his goggles. Her face pressed up against the back of his head, just to the side of his mane. When she gave a small smile, he returned it and whispered very dramatically, "But of course, most importantly, there's *Queenie Blackburn's* grand palace."

He gestured with a hoof as he finished his sentence, and Twilight followed it east to see the colossal structure on the far end of the cavern. Her eyes widened as she took in the grandeur of the building before them. A bright red, complemented by splashes of orange and gold which shone in the light of the artificial sun, decorated the Palace's walls. Towering spires and glittering towers of all shapes and sizes littered the structure, the tallest of which, in the center, rose up nearly half a mile towards the roof of the cavern.

"Wow..." Twilight breathed, "This whole place is absolutely fascinating. Times like these make me wish we weren't in such a hurry, I could spend ages here just studying the architecture and social structure of this city..."

After several minutes of flying, the pair swooped in low towards the hospital - a large, pristine white building that covered three city blocks and towered into the air above, much more impressive than the one she remembered from New Pandemonium, which eased her worries immensely. Briarthorn landed with a brisk trot along the strip in front of the main entrance, knelt down, and let Twilight hop off his back. He gave a gentle pout of disappointment as she climbed down which Twilight ignored. Briarthorn led her through a set of sliding glass doors into the complex and immediately made his way to the service desk, where a staff member was working diligently on shuffling through assorted datapads of various colors. The stallion, a young-looking earth pony with an orange coat and brown mane, looked up from his duties to attend to the visitors almost immediately.

"Oh, hello there," he said cordially, "Welcome to Hope's Point Hospital. How may I be of assistance?"

Twilight was relieved by his politeness. Everypony here from the hotel staff to random passers-by truly did seem more 'normal' by her standards, a reminder of what was waiting for her when she made it home. She was also relieved to see that this hospital was nowhere close to being as crowded as the one back in the city, even if that had been an extraordinary circumstance. The lobby was spotless, minus a small spill in one corner that a janitor was cleaning up while whistling a cheery tune. There weren't any agitated ponies standing around waiting in lines. A few other ponies were seated in the comfy-looking chairs around the lobby, patiently waiting for whatever they'd come here for, and they looked neither impatient nor disgruntled. If anypony had come in here injured, they'd already been taken elsewhere to be treated. Sweet, soothing music played through the speaker system, putting Twilight at ease, filling her with a confidence that told her everything was going to be okay.

"Heya, friend," Briarthorn greeted equally cordially, pulling his goggles back up to their

standard ready position on his forehead, "I believe Doctor Sugarcane is expecting us? Briarthorn and Twilight Sparkle?"

"For the Chief? Well, let me take a look-see." The young stallion looked through his datapad, humming along to the ambient music all the while. He brightened when he found what he was looking for. "Ah, here we are: Briarthorn and Twilight Sparkle. The Chief is expecting you just down the hall in Waiting Room Five. Take a left past the first corner over here," he explained as he pointed down a hallway to his left, "And it'll be the fifth door on your right. Can't miss it, it's labeled pretty clearly."

"Thanks, kiddo," Briarthorn nodded, gesturing with one of his wings for Twilight to follow.

The two took the first left and counted doors until they reached the fifth one on the right, passing by staff members trudging along pushing carts of medical carts along the way. Briarthorn opened the door for Twilight to enter first, then followed right behind her. In the center of the room, Doctor Sugarcane stood pacing back and forth. As they entered, she looked up and smiled.

"Ah! There you are," she greeted, stepping over to them and eagerly shaking their hooves one at a time, "Briarthorn, thank you ever so much for being punctual on this."

"This is a big deal, Sugar," Briarthorn said with a tight-lipped smile, "Lockwood's the issue, so I'm willing to be a little more diligent than my usual laid-back self. What's the problem? Is everything okay?"

Sugarcane sighed, "I am sorry, Briarthorn, but that information is privileged. Part of my oath as a doctor is to maintain doctor-patient confidentiality, and Mister Lockwood asked me specifically not to tell anypony what was going on until everything was all finished, with two exceptions. The first is one member of your group, a 'Flathoof' I believe he said? They're legally brothers, according to the patient, but we're not interested in that right now. The other exception would be Miss Twilight Sparkle here, and as part of that agreement, if I tell *her*, she's not allowed to tell anypony else either. I doubt she'd have the time to anyway."

"Me? Why does he want to see me for?" Twilight asked, "Surely if something was wrong, he'd want to see family first?"

"I can't say any more until you agree to our policy," Sugarcane said firmly, "And that means Briarthorn needs to leave. Now. I am sorry, Briarthorn, I know he's your friend but I have rules I need to follow. You wouldn't *believe* the hoops I had to jump through just to get the ethics board to let me call in Miss Sparkle here. They were hesitant at first, but they got trumped by a... higher authority. I've never seen her get involved like this in our matters."

Briarthorn saluted. "Not a problem, Doc. If Mister Nice Guy asked for Miss Sparkle, then

that's who he gets. Just give me a moment to beg." He took Twilight's hoof in his, and stared deep into her eyes, startling her with such intensity that she was reminded of Fluttershy's oft-mentioned Stare. "Twilight. Lockwood's gotta make it through this. I don't know how you're going to do it. Hell, I probably wouldn't know even if I was allowed to know and you told me and I actually knew. But I trust Lockwood, and he trusts you. So, I trust you, too. Please, Twily. Go all-out *wizard* on his keister, so we can laugh about it later."

"T-thank you, Briarthorn," Twilight smiled anxiously, "I promise, I'll handle anything that comes up here. Lockwood will be fine, I promise." Briarthorn bowed his head low, keeping his eyes on Twilight's as he daintily kissed her hoof. He then made his way out into the hall and left without another word. Twilight stared at her hoof a moment, unsure what to make of the gesture, then shook her head. Only one pony ever called her 'Twily' before. "That guy sure is an... odd one..."

"'Odd' is putting it mildly, dear," Sugarcane laughed. "He has his moments, when he's not being such a scoundrel. Now then, follow me Miss Sparkle. We have important issues to discuss and there's no time to stand around here doing it."

Twilight followed Sugarcane out into the hall and traveled in the opposite direction that Briarthorn had left. Twilight chanced a glance behind her and saw Briarthorn doing the same as he neared the corner towards the exit, and for a fleeting second she desperately wanted him to be able to come with her. She began to feel nervous as they walked past dozens of doors that led into rooms that had ponies in them, recovering from accidents that had befallen them, mostly pegasi but there were quite a few earth ponies as well, but very few unicorns. She thought she recognized one of them, a unicorn mare with a red coat, from the entryway the day before, and wondered if Briarthorn's efforts had indeed gotten all those weary travelers into the city a little quicker. She was so focused on everything else around her that she jumped when Sugarcane started talking again.

"I can't imagine why you're wondering why Lockwood called *you* out of all your friends to come here," Sugarcane said simply, "From what he's told us, you did the best you could out there without proper faculties. I'm honestly impressed. He should be glad to have an accomplished private physician like yourself. It's really the only reason we considered asking you to come down here."

"Private phys-" Twilight started. She then shook her head and then quickly agreed, "Right, yes. Um... I'm afraid I'm still just a novice though. I'm not, strictly-speaking, a professional. I mean, I've never had any 'formal' instruction, I'm mostly self-taught and did a lot of informal studying under a few doctors I knew back at home."

"That's how most of us started, interestingly enough," Sugarcane smiled, "Nearly all of the doctors here on staff are originally from Pandemonium and couldn't afford formal training, but we're all talented with our gifts and we have utmost dedication to our patients, more so than

I can say for any of those 'properly-trained' hotshots back in the city. But I'm rambling. Fact is, Mister Lockwood claims you know some manner of Restomancy, and have a strong backing of magical power to work with as well? That's all we really need here."

"I suppose that's true," Twilight nodded, "Not to brag or anything, but... well, any of my friends will tell you I'm pretty above-average as far as unicorns go. I'm not much on Restomancy knowledge though."

"How much *do* you know, then?" Sugarcane asked sincerely.

Twilight hummed a moment, "Well, I don't know if the texts I've read are what those you know, so I guess I may as well list them." She lifted a hoof to start counting off her list, "Let's see, basic Mending, Diagnose, Extraction, advanced Mending, um... and I suppose I've dabbled a little in expert Mending, but I'm not sold on my skill with it just yet."

"That's an impressive list for a 'beginner'," Sugarcane blinked, "I think you're selling yourself short, myself. Lockwood also told us that you are incredibly powerful as a spellcaster, and I intend to verify that. If you are, then we'll work from there. From what I've heard from you, I don't have much doubt though in your ability, only your strength. The amount of power required to strip the curse safely is beyond the power of any unicorn I've ever met, but Lockwood was insistent that you'd meet that expectation."

Twilight nodded firmly. She was worried, but only for a moment. She was confident that she'd recovered enough that her magic was back to full, or at least *near*-full, power. "I understand what's needed of me. I'll meet your expectations, I promise you that."

"I just have one question before we go on: does blood make you squeamish at all?"

Twilight shook her head. "I've seen my fair share of blood during my instructions, and plenty enough in the past two weeks. I think I can stomach a little blood. Why does that—"

Sugarcane lifted a hoof to stop her. "We'll get to that." She took a small device out of her pocket resembling a tuning fork attached to a small screen with a few buttons on it. As she adjusted it, she asked, "Do you know any basic Attitudinizing spells?"

Twilight blushed. "Actually... no. I never studied any. I... never thought I'd need anything like that."

Sugarcane blinked. "Huh... interesting. No matter, any spell will do, but Attitudinizing magicks tend to be a little easier to get accurate readings on. Let's see... ah... how about a Teleportation spell? It's a high-precision, high-power spell, isn't it? That should give me close enough to accurate. Do you know how to Teleport?"

“Oh, that I can *certainly* do,” Twilight agreed with a proud smile.

Sugarcane attached the tuning fork to Twilight’s horn, and Twilight immediately charged up the spell she’d been asked for. She was glad that she’d eaten and rested all night, because she now had more than enough power to go through with a Teleport confidently again. She was eager to prove she was regaining her former strength, not just to this one doctor here, but to herself. The spell popped, and Twilight didn’t move an inch. The tuning fork had absorbed the entirety of the spell and directed it into the tiny reader with a crackling pop of electricity.

Sugarcane took the device away and looked at it intently, then smiled brightly as she replaced it. “I’m impressed, Miss Sparkle. You should have more than enough power to do what’s needed of you, with proper direction of course. A terrible shame you didn’t know how to do it yourself... oh, I apologize, I didn’t mean to sound like it’s your-”

“It’s quite alright,” Twilight smiled, “After everything that’s happened to me and my friends lately, I plan on extensively studying Restomancy when I get home. You never can be too careful.”

“Well, yes, at any rate, that settles it. I think you perfectly meet what qualifications you’ll need here,” she said as she ushered Twilight onto an elevator. She pressed a button near the bottom and inserted a small key into the lock next to it, then turned to face Twilight. “I suppose it’s time I tell you what exactly is going on.”

“Yes, thank you. I’m... worried,” Twilight said weakly, “All of my friends are, some more than others. Lockwood’s done so much for us, I don’t think any of us could bear something happening to him. Is he going to be okay?”

“I’m afraid that I can’t immediately assuage your fears, my dear. Lockwood’s condition is... much more serious than our initial diagnostics revealed. I have some good news, and some bad news. The good news is, he’ll live. We’ve managed to isolate the Red Death curse and keep it away from his vital organs, and even managed to seal that wound of his. So there’s that.”

Twilight breathed a sigh of relief, “Well, thank goodness for that. But... there’s bad news too? Oh dear...”

“The bad news is...” Sugarcane gave a deep sigh and gently put a hoof on Twilight’s shoulder. “The curse spread into his left wing and managed to wreck havoc there, far more than we could have been able to stop. It’s not your fault, you likely aren’t too familiar with pegasus anatomy. Pegasi wings are delicate, incredibly sensitive to stimuli but more importantly very susceptible to damage. Though we’ve managed to contain it there and keep it from progressing further, it’s already eaten away at the nerves in his wing far too much to recover from.”

Twilight gasped, “You don’t mean-”

Sugarcane uncomfortably shifted her own wings. "I'm afraid that your friend is... likely never to fly again."

Twilight fought to hold back tears. She knew how much pegasi depended on being able to fly just for daily activity. Even Fluttershy, who disliked flying for anything, would admit that she still needed it in some capacity to pursue wayward critters. "Is there nothing we can do?" she asked, "Is there no way we can prevent this?"

"To prevent this, no. It's too far gone to recover from now. You'd have had to get him here within hours of the initial exposure to solve that kind of problem, or at the very least kept a very consistent Immunization rotation on the infected area, but that's highly advanced Restomancy." She pat Twilight gently on the shoulder again. "Be glad though that you did for him what you did. I don't actually know *what* you did, but it slowed the progression of the plague down enough that it didn't hit anything that could kill him. You saved his life."

Twilight wanted to stop her right there and tell her that she wasn't responsible for that at all, that it was all Tick Tock's doing. But, Lockwood was placing his faith in *her*, and to be fair, Doctor Sugarcane seemed to need Twilight for something that only she could do. Tick Tock didn't know Restomancy beyond Diagnose, and admitted that she haphazardly jerry-rigged Restomancy-like spells in ways that Twilight couldn't imagine thinking of on her own.

With a ding, the elevator doors opened, allowing the two ponies to step out and trot down another hallway, this one devoid of almost all staff members and equipment. The walls were metallic and silver as was the floor and ceiling, all of them shiny and spotless, reflecting the light of the strips of bulbs above their heads.

"What exactly is it that you need me for?" Twilight asked as they rounded a corner, "I mean, if this was just for private visitations, surely Flathoof would have priority. You need me for something specific... don't you?"

"To be blunt? Yes," Sugarcane said, "You see, we're at the point in our treatment when we would normally have to cut our losses and... amputate." Twilight visibly cringed at that word. Sugarcane's again nervously shifted her wings in anxiety. "Lockwood wouldn't just lose his ability to fly, he'd lose a wing as well. It's a drastic measure, but the problem is that we can't keep the plague subdued forever. Medicine doesn't work. The only solution would be constant application of particular fields of Restomancy that rotate on and off to keep the plague from immunizing itself to them, but for that he'd need to stay here for the rest of his life, or have one of our most talented unicorn doctors follow him around everywhere he goes. No pony would want that. Least of all him, he was adamant about that much."

"He *agreed* to amputation?!" Twilight blurted. She was astounded. For a pegasus, losing a wing would be almost the same as a unicorn losing her horn. That Sugarcane, a pegasus

herself, would even suggest such a thing to Lockwood surprised her.

“Actually, no,” Sugarcane said with a shake of her head, “He adamantly refused that as well, and elected to go with a more ‘unorthodox’ treatment.”

“And that is?”

Sugarcane led Twilight around another corner, and the two stopped in front of a large, metal double door clearly labeled, “Operating Room 7: Curse Removal”. Twilight gulped when she noticed all the warning labels that covered the door.

“Removing the curse entirely, without removing the wing, of course,” Sugarcane said matter-of-factly.

“Wait, *that’s* ‘unorthodox’?! That sounds like precisely what he needs!” Twilight exclaimed, “Why the hesitation?!”

“It is not at all an easy process,” Sugarcane sighed, “The Red Death curse is a finicky beast. It doesn’t react well to ponies trying to remove it. It absorbs and attacks flesh with startling speed and voracious hunger, not unlike a virus. Even an above-average spellcaster would be hard-pressed to wrangle with the stuff. Normally, we can handle it. Small injuries aren’t a big issue, we have techno-magic tools that are specifically engineered to treat the stuff. But here, the plague has spread throughout his entire wing, and pegasi wings are a different matter altogether. There’s simply too much to handle, and what’s worse, the plague stimulates rapid molting and feather development, so there is a constant supply of blood in his feathers to continuously feed the plague. It’s a rapid, self-perpetuating process, hence why amputation was our favored option. We just can’t extract the curse fast enough or thoroughly enough to cure him.”

Twilight understood immediately where this was going. “So... you need *me*, then? What exactly can I do that your doctors can’t?”

Sugarcane grinned. “It’s your strength that’s the real boon here. I’m glad Mister Lockwood’s confidence in you wasn’t misplaced, otherwise this all would have been a massive waste of effort. Mister Lockwood is already prepared, and we were just waiting to see which option we were going to take. I think with you here, we can make this work.”

Sugarcane led Twilight through the double doors and into a wide, white room lined with rows of seats encircling another, smaller white room. A thick sheet of glass separated the two rooms, giving Twilight an easy view into the smaller one. She gasped loudly at what she saw.

The massive lamp on the ceiling made the entire room blindingly bright. Lockwood lay unconscious on his stomach upon an operating table, his breathing slow and labored, with a

breathing mask over his muzzle which hooked up to a large, green canister nearby. His right wing, which was still healthy, lazily drooped over one side of the table. The other stretched out completely to the other side so that every individual feather was exposed and extended. The joints were slightly distended and each and every feather was discolored and wilted. Small tinges of a pink glow, matching the glowing prong on a techno-magic device nearby, held them aloft.

Inside the room with Lockwood stood one other pony, a chubby earth pony mare with a creamy yellow coat and a white mane and tail. The nurse wore a set of bright green scrubs covering her from head to hoof and pair of safety goggles over her eyes. She busily operated knobs and levers on several nearby devices as she went about picking up mottled feathers that were dropping from Lockwood's wing and disposing them in a hazardous waste bin.

Outside the room, looking in, was a unicorn. His coat was dark pink, his mane and tail a bright blue, and he was also wearing green scrubs and goggles like the pony inside.

"Doctor Heartthrob," Sugarcane greeted simply as she stepped forward. The stallion turned and greeted her cordially with a hoofshake. "I trust all the preparations are done? Are we ready to proceed?"

"The patient is prepped and ready, right on schedule as asked," Heartthrob explained with a friendly, professional tone, "We're all set to proceed, just give the word."

"Excellent," Sugarcane smiled. She stepped aside and gestured for Twilight to step forward.

"Is this my... 'assistant'? The 'novice'?" Heartthrob asked as he quickly sized up Twilight, "Well, she's definitely got the doctor mindset to her. Always on call. Good habit to have. Liking the cloak, by the way. Got a real master wizard feel to it. You don't mess around, Miss...?"

"Twilight Sparkle," Twilight nodded appreciatively, "I appreciate the compliment on my cloak, but I suppose I'll be wearing the same scrubs and goggles while I'm in there though? Sanitary reasons, I take it? Sorry if I'm asking silly questions, this is my first time doing anything like this..."

"It was very astute of you. Yes, these are specially-crafted scrubs just for Curse Disposal operations. They're laced with Immunization magicks to ward off accidental contamination." Heartthrob smiled politely at the anxious look on Twilight's face. "No need to be nervous, little lady. Go on, get suited up in the washroom there, then we'll get started. Go on, double time," he added with a few hasty stamps of his hooves, his voice light-hearted and still very much polite.

Twilight hastily nodded and grabbed the set of scrubs from the wall with her magic, then entered the washroom. She was out in under a minute, busily adjusting the mouthguard and

goggles as she went. Heartthrob hummed while he looked her over. With a nod of approval, he showed her towards the door of the smaller operating room. Doctor Sugarcane took up a position in the exterior room. Twilight and Heartthrob both watched her with curiosity as she adjusted a small headset near her ear with what looked like a tiny camera attached to it. She was attempting to get a clear view of the inner room, moving around chairs and adjusting her angle so that the light above didn't cause any sort of glare.

"Excuse me, Doctor Sugarcane, but... what are you doing?" Heartthrob asked, some of his politeness dropping out of his tone, "More observers are just going to make this poor mare nervous, I'd prefer-"

Sugarcane hastily waved her hooves to motion for Heartthrob to cease his talking. It was too late. He was *forced* to a stop when, with an initial click as the system activated, a voice boomed over the loudspeaker in the operation room.

"Don't give half a **damn** what you'd *prefer*, Doctor Heartthrob." The voice was full of fire, no sense of cordiality in it whatsoever.

Twilight was about to speak up when Heartthrob suddenly very nervously blurted, "Y-Y-Your Majesty? W-w-what are you-"

The voice interrupted, "Specifically asked your *boss* to keep an eye on this operation for me. Have put aside my other tasks for the moment. This is more important. *Problem* with this decision?"

Heartthrob hastily shook his head. "N-no, milady, there's no problem here."

The voice hummed for all of a second before speaking again. "You there - Twilight Sparkle."

Twilight pointed a hoof at herself, astounded that the voice on the other end of the speaker knew her name. "M-me? Oh... um... y-yes, Your Highness?"

"Will say this just once. Hate repeating self; hope you're *listening* - that's a good, dear *friend* of mine on that table there. Went through a lot of trouble to make sure that he's taken care of by the best and brightest *my* city has to offer. Am recalling a debate regarding *permission* to break *protocol*. Seeing as the medical staff has decided to include you in on this? Am issuing the same statement to *you* that was issued to *them*: do *not* disappoint. For the rest of you? Will have your *licenses* if that stallion has *anything* else happen to him, *understand?*"

"Y-yes, of course Your Majesty," Heartthrob nervously gulped.

"For *you*, Twilight Sparkle: anything happens to *him*? You and your friends will kiss your

little vacation across the sea goodbye. Would make you *swim* before even *beginning* to think about letting anypony fly you across. Especially your *idiot 'tour guide'*."

Twilight nodded firmly. "I wouldn't let anything happen to Lockwood, he's my—"

"Good friend? *Highly* doubt he's as close with you than with *me*, but that's a good thought to keep in mind," the Queen's voice hissed, "Sugarcane is going to be keeping a tab on the entire operation. Am *not* taking any chances here. Any '*screw-ups*', any *at all*, **will** know who is responsible. That is all. Get to work. **Now!**"

As the speaker went dead, Twilight gulped loudly, completely unsure what to make of what had just happened. It was bad enough that Lockwood's well-being was on the line, but now she had the pressure of doing this to make sure she made it home too? Briarthorn wasn't kidding, the Queen certainly didn't play around. Twilight already didn't like her attitude, even if she did appreciate the Queen's dedication to Lockwood's well-being enough to entrust it to her. She nervously followed Heartthrob, who'd calmed down immensely in the past few seconds, over to the operating table.

Heartthrob turned to her and began to explain just what was going on, his original polite tone returning in earnest. "Now, I'm sure Doctor Sugarcane told you all about what's happening here?"

"Briefly," Twilight nodded, "I'm going to be helping you extract the curse. Right?"

"Indeed you are," Heartthrob agreed, "I understand you're not *officially* a doctor or healer, and so don't know the more advanced Restomancy spells needed to operate here. Well, that's what I'm here for. I'm not going to sugarcoat this, because you'll see soon enough what we're doing, so I may as well get it out of the way: I'll be making incisions along the patient's wings in the most highly-infected areas. You're not squeamish, are you? Please tell me—"

"Doctor Sugarcane already asked me, and no, I'm not," Twilight affirmed, "I'm a little nervous, no, a *lot* nervous, but... I think I can handle it."

"Well, thank goodness for that," Heartthrob breathed, "At any rate, as I'm making the incisions, the curse is going to react. Red Death is a hungry beast, and my incisions are going to break through our temporary isolation measures, which will allow the plague to spread. Your job is to follow along precisely after me and extract the curse as we go along. It's a very simple Extraction spell, one of the most basic Restomancy spells there are. You'd normally use it for removing, say, splinters."

"I know the spell. I suppose that the reason I'm needed then is because the curse will attempt to resist, and my strength can overpower it?"

“Precisely. So you understand what we’re doing then? It’s a very simple concept, but in practice you’ll find it much more difficult. Like I said, you’re going to need to follow my magic *precisely*. If the curse gets away from you, it will beat a path straight past the isolation measures and race towards uninfected areas. We’ll start with the wingtip, but once we move to the base, ‘uninfected areas’ include his heart, lungs, and stomach. It is imperative that we don’t make any mistakes.”

Twilight took a deep breath, trying her best not to shake. “Whew... well, if Lockwood is entrusting me with this task, then I’m not going to disappoint him. I’m ready whenever you are.”

Heartthrob nodded. “Good, spoken like a true surgeon.” He turned to the nurse and nodded at her as well. “Nurse Lemoncake, is everything ready to go?”

The nurse gave a small salute. “Yes, Doctor Heartthrob, we’re all set. The room is sealed and the disposal measures are prepped.”

Heartthrob beckoned for Twilight to follow him over to the wingtip and lifted a scalpel from the nearby table with a dull blue glow of magic. He turned to Twilight and nodded firmly. “Okay, Miss Sparkle. Here we go...”

Twilight gulped loudly as Heartthrob’s scalpel lifted to the furthest out of Lockwood’s primary feathers, which was visibly wilted despite being newly formed, as told by the red-white tinting of the shaft. The blade sliced delicately along the shaft, starting at the quill, and moved all the way down until it went through the tip, leaving a dull blue trail of magic behind it. As the blade sliced through, Twilight followed precisely in its wake with her own spell. She did her best to hold in her anxiety and nauseousness at the feeling of her magic physically digging into the blood inside of the feather. She could feel the pulsing magic of the curse-plague though, that much was for certain, and she could feel it reacting exactly as she’d been told, trying to sift its way past her spell. She let her magic waft out through the feather interior, sweeping through it like a strainer and picking out the foreign bodies as it went. She began sweating under the strain of making sure the spell didn’t extract anything but what she was looking for, as well as keeping it shaped precisely like the interior of the feather so that nothing got by it. Luckily, Nurse Lemoncake was right behind her with a dry cloth to dab on her forehead to keep it from dampening her goggles.

When she too reached the tip not more than a split second after he did, she tugged her magic out of the feather and looked on in repulsion at what she’d carried with her. The Red Death curse looked exactly as she remembered it - a red, gooey substance that writhed and wriggled in her magic in an attempt to escape and seek out flesh and blood to devour. Heartthrob returned his attention to the quill of the feather, and the glow of his magic changed from blue to green as it slid along the length of the shaft, repairing the incision completely. He then motioned Twilight towards the disposal container, a tall cylinder marked with warning labels advising against putting one’s anything near it and whose interior glowed a bright purple, which

Lemoncake had placed between the two unicorns. Twilight dropped the glob of red goo into it and listened intently as it sizzled and popped. The magic from inside the container flashed brightly, then stopped in an instant. The curse had been disposed of.

Heartthrob took another deep breath and let his magic, now a soft pink, stroke along Lockwood's feather gently, straightening the vanes and barbs so that the feather looked almost good as new, though it was still a little dreary. "Whew..." he breathed, "Well done, Miss Sparkle. That's one feather down..."

"And so many to go..." Twilight gulped.

"Just stay patient, and stay focused," Heartthrob advised her as he lifted his scalpel again, "The feathers are the easy part. We haven't gotten to the skeletal structure or muscles yet. You're doing great for your first time, but we're not out of the woods yet. Ready for the next feather, Miss Sparkle?"

"As I'll ever be..." Twilight nodded.

Twilight slowly blinked awake, rubbing her eyes in an attempt to both rid them of sleep and shield them from the incredibly bright light of the room. Her eyes took a moment to adjust. The bed wasn't too comfortable, causing her to awkwardly straighten up into a seated position. She looked around, confused about where she was. Everything around her was a perfectly clean white aside from the bed sheets, which were a dull pink. She'd somehow ended up in her cloak again, but she didn't remember changing out of those scrubs. Scrubs? Why had she been wearing scrubs again? And why did this look like the recovery room of some-

"Hospital?" she muttered. She suddenly jolted upright in realization. "Lockwood!"

She leapt out of the bed and landed cleanly on the floor, and was about to head out the door when somepony else walked in. She instantly recognized the mare as the earth pony that had been in the operating room earlier. What was her name again? Lemoncake? She carried a tray topped with a small plate and a glass of water in her teeth. She'd replaced her green scrubs with a set of blue ones, and she was down a set of goggles.

"Oh, you're up," Lemoncake observed, her voice muffled by the tray and her clenched teeth. She trotted just past Twilight and set these on the swivelling arm near the bed. "Good, then I don't need to worry about that. I was just bringing you a complimentary lunch."

"Lunch?" Twilight asked, "What time is it?"

"Just a few minutes 'till noon," Lemoncake stated, "You were only out for a few hours,

thank goodness.”

“Out?!” Twilight exclaimed, “Oh... oh no, is everything-”

“Relax, Miss Sparkle, everything’s fine,” Lemoncake said sweetly, “You and Doctor Heartthrob did a fantastic job. I’ve seen a few operations like that, and let me tell you, I’m impressed. He asked me to come get him as soon as you awoke, so if you don’t mind?”

Twilight nodded. “Oh... oh certainly, go right ahead.”

Lemoncake left the room as quickly as she came, leaving Twilight to take a seat back on her bed. She lifted the lid off the plate and looked at the food beneath. She was impressed - it certainly looked like Dolor food, and though it wasn’t as decorative as what she’d had the night before, it didn’t look unsavory like the hospital food she remembered from back home. She levitated a spoonful of the green stuff to her mouth and took a bite; it tasted like freshly-steamed broccoli loaded with butter. By the time Doctor Heartthrob and Lemoncake had returned, she’d finished the entire plate full of ‘broccoli’, ‘mashed potatoes’, and ‘mushrooms’, and almost all of her glass of water.

“Ah, here’s our miracle worker, up and at ‘em,” Heartthrob smiled broadly as he entered the room. He greeted Twilight with a very friendly hoofshake, “You gave me quite a fright, my dear, I tell you.”

“What happened?” she asked anxiously.

He gave a light laugh. “I guess all that anxiety finally caught up to you. I’d just begun congratulating you on a job well done when you just plain passed out on the operation room floor. You’re fine, nothing wrong with you, just a little panic attack is all. Understandable, that was your first surgery and you’re not exactly a professional. Don’t worry, we all go through that phase at some time or another.”

“So... Lockwood’s okay then? The operation was a success?”

“He’s as ‘okay’ as he’s ever going to be,” Heartthrob sighed, “I assume Doctor Sugarcane told you about his rather unfortunate new handicap?”

Twilight glumly nodded. “Yes... though I was hoping maybe we could’ve done something. Are you sure we can’t help him?”

“Unfortunately, the damage was too severe and too far along to repair, which I’m sure Sugarcane explained, yes? We were able to prevent further damage, but his left wing is no longer capable of true flight, sorry to say. He can lift it *maybe* to shoulder height, enough to glide in case of an emergency I suppose. Nothing more than that though, not without extensive

surgery and techno-magic implants, which we just do not have the faculties for. That stuff is extremely rare and expensive to produce, so we can't get our hooves on it easily. Even Pandemonium doesn't produce them regularly enough to procure."

"I see..." Twilight sighed, "Well... at least he's alive and still has his wing, right? I'll take some solace in that..."

"That's the best you can do for him," Heartthrob said reassuringly, "He has a few other bits of residual damage from the healing process - magical scarring, stuff like that. Nothing that will affect him negatively on the physical side. It will take some time for those to heal, I'm afraid. Also, I know you couldn't see it in the operating room, but we couldn't do much about his-"

A noise at the door alerted them to the presence of a newcomer. "Twilight!"

Tick Tock galloped over, and she began frantically panicking over Twilight as soon as she was within hoof's reach. Her horn glowed bright blue as she wafted the aura around Twilight's head and horn extensively, changing the spell's colors rapidly from blue to green to red to pink and back to blue again. Satisfied nothing was wrong, she let out a sigh of relief and dimmed her horn's glow again.

"Thank goodness," Tick Tock breathed.

"T-Tick Tock?" Twilight blurted, "What are you doing here?"

"Briarthorn got a report about an hour ago about what happened, and we headed straight over. Dropped what we were doing and everything. Is everything alright, Twilight? You're not feeling weak are you? No pain in your Ley Lines?"

"Yes yes, everything's fine," Twilight smiled.

"We took good care of her, Miss...?" Heartthrob said, holding out a hoof towards Tick Tock.

Tick Tock took it and gave him a quick hoofshake out of courtesy. "Tick Tock," she answered.

"Well, Miss Tock, I assure you that we did everything possible to keep Miss Sparkle here as comfortable as possible during her brief recovery. She merely fainted from anxiety, not exhaustion or anything of the sort. From your reaction I take it she's been recovering from a Ley Line fracture recently?"

"Yes, that's precisely it," Tick Tock said, staring at Twilight, "By the stars, Twilight, have you any idea what could have happened if you hadn't recovered fully before you started

throwing spells around willy-nilly like that?”

Twilight pat reassuringly Tick Tock on the shoulder. “I’m fine, Tick Tock, really. What’s with all the worrying? This isn’t like you.”

“Well I heard you were performing some advanced magicks down here,” Tick Tock said quickly, “I couldn’t believe what I was hearing! All I could think was, ‘that stupid girl is performing Restomancy already?!’ You just got finished recovering, you dolt! You shouldn’t be casting such advanced magicks so soon!”

“It’s alright, Tick Tock, I’m fine, okay?” Twilight smiled, “You don’t need to worry so much anymore.”

“Anymore?” Tick Tock blurted, “Twilight, we just got finished agreeing we were *friends!* If anything, I should be *more* concerned for your well-being.”

Twilight laughed. “Well, I suppose you have a point. Speaking of friends, where are the others?”

“Right here, darling,” Rarity announced from the doorway. She entered the room, followed by the others, until the room had become quite crowded.

Briarthorn raced past the rest of the group and nearly bowled over Tick Tock in his bid to make it to Twilight’s recovery bed first. He wasted no time at all in scooping her up in a huge hug with both his hooves and his wings. “Twily, Twily, Twily, you wonderful mare you! Everything alright?”

“Oh... hey there Briarthorn,” Twilight laughed skittishly, “Wow, you must’ve been really worried. You can relax now, okay? Y-you’ve... kinda got your wings all over me.”

Tick Tock coughed loudly and prodded Briarthorn hard in the flank, right in the center of the shield of his Cutie Mark. “Oy there, mate, mind letting her *real* friends get in there first?”

Briarthorn winced. Then, since his face so close to Twilight’s, he gave her a private grin of conspiracy as he put her down. He spun to face Tick Tock, taking one wing off of Twilight in the process. In a sing-song falsetto voice, he giggled, “Oh, *hey* there, Tickety Tockety! If you were feeling frisky you only needed to ask~” He leaned in close to Tick Tock’s ear and whispered in his normal baritone, “Your *aim*’s a bit off too.” Tick Tock sputtered incoherently as Briarthorn finally pulled his other wing away from Twilight and graciously stepped back to let the others through to crowd her bedside.

With the crowd dissipated, Lemoncake suddenly blurted. “Flathoof? *Flathoof?!*”

Flathoof blinked and looked at her in surprise. "Lemoncake? Is that you?"

The crowd of ponies separated suddenly as Lemoncake barged a path through it to reach Flathoof, and she gave him a big hug.

"Hellooooo nurse," Briarthorn whistled, "Hey there Flathoof, I'm impressed. She's a *much* nicer piece than Lockwood."

"W-what?" Flathoof blinked. He looked at Lemoncake, then back to Briarthorn, and had to visibly resist the urge to start shouting again. "By the stars, boy, you just can't keep that yap of yours shut, can you? She's my *cousin*."

Lemoncake broke the hug. "Oh, Flathoof, it's so good to see you! What brings you all the way out to my neck of the woods, huh? I never thought I'd ever see *you* out here."

"It's a... long story," Flathoof chuckled, "How are you? I haven't seen you in... what has it been, five years?"

"Six," Lemoncake corrected, "I wasn't there when you graduated from-"

"Yes! Six! Ha haaa..." Flathoof suddenly blurted, remembering that Briarthorn was in the room with them, "Ahem... r-right, six years. Been a while, cousin. You're looking well."

"Hmmm..." Briarthorn hummed, his eyes drifting down and around Lemoncake's flank, "Cousins, huh? I can see the family resemblance. Your family's got some tone, Flathoof. Good genes." His eyes drifted casually over towards Applejack. "Excellent breeding stock, if I may say so..."

"Flathoof, your friend is weird," Lemoncake murmured, making a face.

Flathoof grumbled, "Yes, he... certainly is. Um... we'll catch-up later, Lemoncake. I've got a lot on my plate right now. We're all here to check on our friend, and especially Lockwood. How is he? Is he alright?"

"Hold on a moment," Heartthrob interjected, "Lemoncake, this fellow is your cousin? Aren't he and that Lockwood fellow downstairs brothers?"

"Yeah?" Lemoncake blinked.

"Why didn't you say anything?!" Heartthrob blurted, "You and Lockwood are related! You're not supposed to be within fifty feet of an operating room if he's on the table!"

"Psh, oh come off it Doctor Heartthrob, we barely count as 'related'," Lemoncake said

with a roll of her eyes, “He’s *adopted* or something like that. I hardly think that counts.”

Heartthrob put a hoof to his face. “Aww... geez, the ethics board is going to have a field day with this one...”

“Well, all that aside,” Twilight coughed, “You said Lockwood is okay now, right?”

“Oh, is he?!” Fluttershy exclaimed, “Oh please, tell me we can see him now! Please!”

Heartthrob looked sullen. “Well, unfortunately no, not yet. He’s still recovering from the operation and needs to heal, not to mention get some proper rest and food. Since Doctor Sugarcane isn’t here to inform you, I suppose I can relay our visiting policies. We’re required to give patients a rest period before accepting visitors, depending on the severity of the operation. By my estimates, he’ll be well enough to visit by eight o’clock tonight or so, just after dinner time. You can come visit then, visiting hours are always open.”

Fluttershy was visibly heartbroken. “Oh... I... I just wanted to see him...”

“It’ll be fine, Fluttershy,” Flathoof assured her, “We’ll come visit him later. We all will.”

“Well, you’ll have to take turns,” Heartthrob explained, “Our single-bed recovery rooms are fairly small. We only allow two visitors at a time, three at the most in special circumstances. This is a group room that happened to be empty, so you all lucked out in visiting Miss Sparkle. Lockwood needs to be kept isolated for now, just following procedure.”

“That’s alright,” Twilight nodded, “We would’ve given first dibs to Fluttershy and Flathoof anyway, isn’t that right everypony?”

“Oh what? I don’t get first dibs?” Briarthorn said with mock offense, “He’s my close buddy buddy too, y’know?” Flathoof and Fluttershy both gave him serious looks, at which he chuckled. “I’m not *really* kidding, here- I know family and, what, girlfriend material?” Fluttershy turned red and fumbled nervously with her hooves. “You guys are serious stuff, but I’ve been trying to talk to this guy for more than a minute at a time every couple months for like three years. Once you guys are done, I’m right behind you.”

“That’s fine,” Flathoof nodded, “Eight, huh? I can deal with waiting that long.”

“I suppose if we have to...” Fluttershy frowned, “Oh... I do hope he’s alright...”

Twilight suddenly frowned. “Oh... right, we should probably let them know exactly what’s going on.”

“Ah, yes, I’d almost forgotten in all the commotion,” Heartthrob nodded, “I’ll keep this

simple, ladies and gentlemen. I'm not quite as good as sugar-coating information as Doctor Sugarcane is, so bear with me if I sound a mite formal here. Your friend is alive, that much is for certain, and we did everything we could, but we couldn't fix everything that was wrong with him, given the timeframe in which he was delivered to us. Unfortunately, Mister Lockwood's wing has been damaged tremendously by the Red Death curse. It'll recover its fullness and plumage in time but the nerve damage was immense. I'm sorry to say, that he's never going to be able to fly again."

Everypony in the room's faces drooped, save for Twilight's; she already knew. Rainbow spoke first. "Come on Doc, you've gotta be able to do something here. Not able to fly? Do you have any idea what that means for a pegasus?"

"I'm afraid I do, ma'am," Heartthrob sighed, "But there's nothing we can do. He'll be able to glide, and just barely at that. True flight is out of the question. We don't have the resources to repair that kind of damage. There's also some minor magical scarring, nothing too serious."

"That poor..." Rainbow trailed off.

Fluttershy burst into tears. "Oh... t-t-this is all m-m-my-"

"Stop it, there you go again," Flathoof chided her, "This isn't your fault, Fluttershy. How many times are Lockwood and I going to have to say it?"

Briarthorn, to nopony's surprise, dove headlong into trying to lift the mood. "Hey! Hey, hey! Guys, come on. Get a grip on your sad, this mopey moperly is *completely* the wrong attitude. The Doc just told us Mister Nice Guy is guaranteed alive! So he's not quite perfect! That just gives him another story to tell. Nopony's perfect to begin with, and we sure as hell don't end that way. I'm just glad I didn't have to tell you guys 'no more Mister Nice Guy', because that line has been sitting in my head, haunting me and making me rather worry-warty... huh? Oh, look, see, now you're all looking at me like I *wanted that to be funny*. No, that's just the way I think. I'd feel as bad as the rest of you. Frankly, if I'd have done it, it'd be to commit suicide from the inevitable pummeling I'd have gotten from you in your grief. See? Suddenly serious again, right? Yeah, I think we should move away from what *didn't* happen today, and be glad that at least you all got here and got our girl Twily here with him in time to save his life, right? Spend the effort, flip those frowns around." *

Pinkie Pie agreed wholeheartedly, "Yeah! Yeah, goldenrod over here is right! They did everything they could, and you know what, Lockwood's gonna be fine and dandy, you'll see! It's like Lockwood always says, 'It could be worse!'"

Briarthorn chimed in, "No clouds in the sky, a friend is alive, I think we've got ourselves a good day ahead of us, ladies... and Flathoof."

The murmurs around the group seemed to agree at least that much, though they still weren't exactly ecstatic.

"Well then, I'll let you all take your leave," Heartthrob said as he headed for the door, "Oh, and Twilight? You keep practicing that Restomancy, dear. You've got a real talent for it."

He and Lemoncake left the room, the latter of which waved at Flathoof as she left. Flathoof sighed, "I'll have to hope I can find time to see her before we leave. Well, we have a full day ahead of us then?"

"I can't even think about doing anything..." Fluttershy sniffed, "I just want to see him..."

Rarity pat Fluttershy gently on the back. "Oh, darling, I know you do, but Lockwood wouldn't want you to mope around all day over him now, would he?" Fluttershy sighed and shook her head. "Well then, as dear Flathoof so eloquently put it, we certainly do have a full day ahead of us, don't we? What say we get some lunch and explore the town?"

Briarthorn snorted loudly. "Okay, sure, lunch? Whatever, that's fine, we should get some eats as soon as possible. You guys need that. But explore? More of me as a tour guide, for which you guys don't *really* have much of an appetite? That's you guys going places with me because I'm the one holding your 'day-passes' around here. That's what you're asking. That's the suggestion you're giving me." He snorted loudly again. "Nah. Nah. We just found out my good good buddy Lockwood is A-OK... mostly! We're not gonna just go walking about like a bunch of bucking tourists. You're not just any tourists. You're *my* tourists. We're gonna celebrate. We're gonna celebrate really hard."

"Why can't we celebrate at lunch?" Flathoof blinked.

Briarthorn continued. "Like I said, lunch is good, because it's always good to eat before you go out and *celebrate*. Does anypony really need me to spell this out for them?"

"Oh, are we going to visit that amusement park?" Twilight beamed, "That sounds like a fun way to spend the day! A good way to keep everypony's mind on enjoying themselves and not getting down."

"Oh stars..." Tick Tock sighed, placing a hoof to her face.

"Twily, you are *adorable* when you have no idea what you're talking about," Briarthorn said appreciatively, "But no. We don't have an amusement park here at all, anyway. That's more of a Utopian thing. Besides, we get enough 'thrills' in the real world. No, when I bucking say celebrate, I mean bucking go drinking, and by go drinking, I mean you will feel like your head is on the losing end of one hundred pillow fights, only the pillows are filled with hummingbird down, so it makes you giggle a little bit."

“What the hay does that even *mean*?” Rainbow blanched.

Pinkie raised her hoof excitedly. “Ooh ooh, I think it means like having your brains smashed out with a slice of lemon wrapped round a large gold brick.”

Rainbow threw her hooves up in exasperation. “That makes even *less* sense!”

“Yes, that was quite a silly analogy,” Rarity agreed, “I’ve heard of ‘going out drinking’ before, but never quite described in such a fashion.”

He stared at her. “That’s a serious analogy for a serious reason. You will actually feel like you’ve gotten your head crushed in very slowly and sweetly by the sheer amount of alcohol we’re going to throw back.”

Rarity rolled her eyes. “Certainly there must be something else we can do to celebrate than waste our time in a *bar*?”

Briarthorn chuckled, “If this place has traditions that don’t somehow involve a literally *staggering* amount of alcohol, I must always be drunk when they’re happening on *accident*. If something good around here happens, you celebrate by going out and getting hammered. It’s how we celebrate everything. Sister had a baby? Go get hammered. Successfully performed brain surgery? Go get hammered. Girl you proposed to said ‘yes’? Go get hammered. Found a bit on the ground? Sounds like a reason to celebrate to me! *Go get hammered!*”

“Good heavens... is there *anything* you ponies here *don’t* ‘get hammered’ for?” Rarity blanched.

Briarthorn tapped his chin in thought for just a moment, then shrugged. “Nah. Look, you said wanna explore. Explore why? Because you want to ‘get to know’ Hope’s Point. Am I wrong? I doubt it. So! If that’s your goal, there are only two places worth exploring. First, you’ll want to explore the *Wyrms’ Head*, because that’s where we, as a city, basically all drink. Everything smells faintly of grain alcohol, shame, throw-up, and, if you’re lucky enough to be there with me? *Victory*. Second place you want to explore? The bottom of the second to last quadruple-distilled whiskey chaser you’ve drank.”

There was a silence.

“The second to last because the last one is the one that makes you throw up after you’ve fallen unconscious. There’s always a need for a designated ‘friend’ to roll you out of your own vomit.”

There was another silence.

“You would die if you choked on your own vomit,” Briarthorn said unnecessarily.

“I... um... I don't... uh... know... that sounds... awfully irresponsible...” Rarity nervously gulped.

“Horseapples to responsibility, I'm on this guy's side for once!” Rainbow exclaimed, “After all the screwed up stuff we've been through this week, you know what, I could use a good drink!”

“Actually, y'know what? I'm with Rainbow on this one. I agree with Briarthorn,” Applejack nodded, “When I've had a hard day's work out on the farm, I like ta kick back an' relax with a cold one. Or two. 'pends on how hard a day I had.”

“Oh, you two *would* agree to go out and do something like this!” Rarity huffed, “Somepony *please* tell me they think we should consider another alternative? Perhaps an art gallery, or-”

Pinkie piped up, “Art gallery? Puh-lease, Rarity, that's-”

“*Other* than Pinkie Pie, who I'm *certain* is going to agree with Briarthorn?” Rarity interrupted. Pinkie gave her an indignant look for a moment, then shrugged it off.

Flathoof sighed, “Don't worry Rarity, I've got your back.”

“Well *thank* you, Flathoof,” Rarity said appreciatively, “How about you, Fluttershy? Surely you don't think we should indulge these ruffians in their little drinking games, do you? If they want to go out and 'get hammered', they should do so on their own time!”

“I don't know...” Fluttershy nervously squeaked.

“Oh c'mon, Fluttershy, it'll be great!” Rainbow cheered, “It'll be like our senior year all over again, only this time me and Gilda won't accidentally set fire to the bleachers at the skyball field. Oh man... good times...”

“Um... y-yes, well...” Fluttershy sighed, “As long as we have somepony responsible around to keep everypony out of trouble... you're right, this sounds like it might be a little fun.”

“F-Fluttershy, you can't be *serious*?” Rarity flustered. Fluttershy's lack of response made her sputter. “I... but... *urgh!* Please, tell me somepony else thinks this sounds as dreadful as I do? Tick Tock! Twilight! Darlings, you're of a more refined tastes than I give you credit at times, surely you two-”

“Actually, I’m all for going out for a bevvv myself,” Tick Tock laughed.

“I agree, I’m interested in giving this whole thing a try,” Twilight agreed, “This sounds exciting! I’ve never done anything like this before!”

Rarity was astounded. Her eyebrow began to twitch. “Et tu, Tick Tock? Twilight? Really now, only Flathoof is on my side?” She gave a long, drawn-out sigh, “*Fine*, let’s go out ‘drinking’, like a bunch of addle-brained college foals. What a simply *marvelous* idea! Knowing some of you I just *know* I’m going to be playing chaperone.”

Flathoof rolled his eyes. “Well, far be it from me to ruin everypony’s fun then, I was hoping a few of you would disagree. You can go ahead and join them a little if you’d like, Rarity. To be honest, drinking ain’t really my thing. See, I’m-”

“Delaying the inevitable!” Briarthorn interrupted, “I love it when a plan comes together. Everypony, this way! First, lunch. Then? Then, we hit the best bucking pub this side of New Pandemonium!”

The building that Twilight and her friends now looked at was, to be blunt, bizarre. It didn’t look so much like a building as they’d expected. What it did look like was several dozen boats crushed together in some horribly ill-thought-out attempt to *resemble* a building, and they were just barely getting away with it by the skin of their figurative teeth. It was very, very tall, easily four ‘floors’, for lack of a better term, up. It was so wide that it covered an entire city block, though rather unevenly. The awnings, windows, and doors that had been attached post-boat wreck were laden with glowing lights and signs that attracted the attention of passers-by and directed them towards the entrance at street level smack dab in the middle of the eastern side of the structure. Curiously, one boat, completely intact, hung from a crane-like structure at the top, swaying back and forth high above the group of mares and two stallions and looking not at all sturdy.

“Could a heap of crap *be* more beautiful?” Briarthorn proudly declared, “It’s got rooms that used to be prison transports, rooms that used to be cruise ships, rooms that used to be ‘gar-barges’ -you’ll know what I mean if you end up in one - rooms that used to be cargo ships, and everything in between! I think there’s even an old kelp-fishing boat that got fashioned into the restrooms on the north side. This, is Wurm’s Head Tavern. Pinkie!” he shouted, sharply pointing a hoof at Pinkie, “I need an intro line. Go!”

Pinkie thought for all of a second, then solemnly intoned in a wizened, aged voice: uniquely distinctive, yet unrecognizable to the group, “You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy.”

Briarthorn nodded sagely, one hoof over his heart. "Better words have never been spoken."

"It looks... uh... *unique*," Rarity nervously laughed, "Yes. Yes, that's the word I think works best here. 'Unique'."

"This ain't like any bar I've ever been to before," Applejack said with a shake of her head, "Looks more like a wacko dream somepony came up with after fallin' asleep in a field o' poppies. Downright weird."

"Heh, you've been to some pretty tame bars then," said Tick Tock. "I like this place. It has a certain seafaring charm to it. I wouldn't be surprised if you tossed this whole thing in the ocean if it was seaworthy. What's with that hanging boat up top though?"

Briarthorn pointed happily at it. "Oh, that? That's the reserved lounge for the pilots. Seeing as us pilots are all pegasi, it makes sense to put it someplace other folk can't just head up to. Of course-" he started.

Suddenly, a loud crack came from above and a large chunk of the bottom of the boat fell out, crashing several yards away from them in splintering wood and strips of metal. Twilight had to put up a shield to keep debris from flying into their group, who apart from Briarthorn had all leapt away. Out of the rubble of floorboards and broken bar stools crawled a dazed unicorn, who stumbled about a bit and looked up in disdain.

A pegasus up above shouted down, "Way to go, horn-face! Now we have to fix the damn floor again!"

"Of course," Briarthorn continued with a laugh, "Sometimes every now and again, some poor bastard tries to get up there to see why the pilots get such an exclusive backroom. The floorboards are cloud-wood, from when we've got extra clouds leftover from dragging heaps of them back from the Belt of Tranquility. Know this nice unicorn guy, poofs 'em into boards for cheap. Work just like clouds, look just like wood. Very ergonomic. Economic. Eco-friendly."

"I don't think 'bizarre' quite covers what just happened," Tick Tock laughed, "Like I said though, it's quite a charming little dive. I've always kind of liked theme bars, they're usually loaded with all sorts of characters."

"Has sort of a 'pirate' feel to it," Pinkie pointed out, specifically referring to the dragon-like skull above the large doorway, "Skull and crossbones? Total pirate trademark."

Briarthorn grinned in affirmation, "In general that's the sort of clientele that this joint often serves. Pirates. Rogues. Smugglers. That kind of thing. I can honestly say that, to me, there's no line of work that's been more exciting!"

“Wait... so, you’re a pirate?” Pinkie blinked, “You don’t look like any pirate I’ve ever seen before. Where’s your talking parrot? And your *accent*? Pirates everywhere would be *ashamed*. You are a disgrace to Blackbeard, my friend.”

Briarthorn blinked. “Talking... *parrot*? And... *accent*? Oh! Oh, right. Well. *Me*? I’m not *that* kind of pirate... though we do get a few who enjoy that sort of authenticity to it. A little dressing up never hurt anypony, and if it makes them feel more involved with the job, I say go for it! Me, I’m more into the *literal* goal of piracy. Booty, and lots of- Lady Rarity, don’t let your looks go to waste in a mean look like that. I’m not jive-talking turkey ‘bout some fine badonkadonk, even if I am a fan of junk in the trunk. I run goods. What the New Pandemonium military and cops might call being a ‘smuggler’, but what I call ‘delivery boy’. When somepony out there wants something delivered someplace at some time and wants it done neatly and discreetly, I’m your stallion. It’s what most of the pilots around here are known to do! How did you think this city makes a living?”

“Sounds dangerous,” Twilight observed, “I bet you get those Pandemonium types after you all the time.”

“Military, maybe,” Flathoof noted, “I don’t think the NPPD cares much about it. They... uh... have more ‘local’ troubles to worry about. That’s what I’ve heard anyway,” he quickly added.

“I can’t say I approve of participating in such... *illicit* activities for a living,” Rarity frowned.

“Well it’s not like I’m *stealing*,” Briarthorn chuckled, “Not... technically. Not *usually*, anyway. I mean, sure, so a few of the things I transport here and there may or may not have been acquired through less-than-legal means, and my knowledge regarding these circumstances perhaps was or was not current and/or accurate at the time, and I could have maybe, possibly, theoretically taken a little off the top like any good businesspony would or wouldn’t... but hey! A lot of the things I transport ‘illegally,’” he added, making over-exaggerated air quotes with his wingtips, “Actually help ponies out there. Medical supplies, foodstuffs, miscellania like that.”

Fluttershy muttered, “Well... now that you mention it, Lockwood is sort of like that too...”

Twilight agreed, “Oh yes, that’s right. Those passports he helped us get, those were... uh... not quite ‘legally’ acquired, right? But we had to get them, because we needed to get home and in a hurry, right?”

“See? You’re with me, Twily. If you lean back and *squiiiiint* at the letter of the law,” Briarthorn said, pretending to squint at the fine print of some imaginary document, “Sometimes

the spirit is easier to read! You know, that's how Lockwood and I found ourselves acquainted, actually. He's got some sort of charity or underground railroad or therapy hotline or soup kitchen or something, I dunno, I don't ask many questions, that's neither my job nor my concern. Always trying to help out the ponies that live in the slums up in the city, see, and he needed a little help getting Dolor goods on the cheap and then getting them discreetly to the Outer District so that nopony asked questions. Who helped him out with that? Yours truly!"

"Well, that's all very nice and what-have-you, but I do believe it's time to get inside and get to celebrating, right?" Tick Tock anxiously interjected.

"You seem awfully eager, Tick Tock," Twilight hummed.

"Oh, Twilight, you haven't *any* idea how much I need a pint right now," Tick Tock laughed, "You'll join me for a round or two, won't you?"

"A... round?" Twilight blinked, "I don't really know much about this. I've never been drinking before. This is supposed to be a learning experience for me. You seem to know quite a bit, Tick Tock. Care to be my instructor?"

Briarthorn swooped over instantly, another look of outright conspiracy sitting plainly on his face, "Are you even *old enough* to drink, Twilight?"

"How old is... old enough?" Twilight asked quite seriously, "Is there an age limit?"

"Twilight, trust me, you're old enough," Tick Tock said simply. She then got a very sheepish look. "Wait... how old *are* you? I feel like a right sod, I never asked you!"

Twilight's eyes nervously darted back and forth. "Um... w-well..."

"Oh don't look so jittery, Twily. The bartender just needs to know if he should pop a cherry in your scotch. That makes the kids happy," Briarthorn said with a mischievous grin, "That way, we know if your cherry has been scotch-popped. Gives it a nice fruity second aftertaste, after the first aftertaste, which is scotch."

"Wait... they let *foals* drink too?!" Rarity exclaimed.

"Oh, of *course* not! *Heavens*, how socially unconscionable!" Though his pitch and tone matched Rarity's moral outrage, Briarthorn was unable to stop himself from smirking. "As far as we know, no one has ever complained about their child dying of alcohol poisoning. I can call up the doctors again, if you guys need proof. Hey! Relax. The cherry in the scotch? It's magic, by the way. Enchanted, so that if you're below the drinking age, you vomit. Vomit is kinda our benchmark for 'you've had enough'. Also clears out all the nasty stuff in your system so if you *are* underage, no harm no foul. We don't exactly have identification around here, reminds

everypony too much of the whole documentation crap back up in Pandemonium. Real mood killer. Besides! Everypony around here is responsible... mostly!"

"If we're all done arguin' 'bout stuff that really don't make no difference right here an' now, can we just get inside?" Applejack huffed, "Tick Tock's right, I dang well need a drink too."

Briarthorn bowed apologetically. "Let it be entered into the public record, Applejack. We've basically got legal counsel in that sage advice of yours. Follow me!"

The gaggle of mares and two stallions entered the pub and were instantly greeted by the sight of dozens of ponies seated around various tables, enjoying drinks and exuding mirth and delight in all directions. Despite the seedy-looking exterior, the inside was extremely tame and orderly, if simultaneously loud and crowded. There were a few ponies here and there in the crowd that looked the part of a pirate as Pinkie had described them, but all of them looked genuinely jovial and reputable with their wide, sincere smiles and laughs.

The bar itself stretched across the entire west wall, manned by a single salt-and-pepper-colored unicorn with a short, stringy white mane, tail, and bushy mustache. He wore a button-up black vest over a red dress shirt and a pair of very tiny gold-rimmed glasses. He had a coconut half with a frilly umbrella and a bendy straw for a Cutie Mark. He looked every bit like an old-timey bartender that Applejack was of the opinion belonged more in a saloon than a port town pub like this.

Busily running between the bar and the wide variety of tables were a trio of unicorn mares. All three of them looked very, very similar, not just in dress but in coat color, body shape, mane and tail color. The only way they could be told apart were their slightly different mane and tail styles, and their Cutie Marks, though they were similar enough that on a first glance it would be easy to mistake any of them for one of the others. Their coats were light beige and had a bright luster, as if they'd been freshly cleaned and combed. Their manes and tails were dark golden brown. They each wore a very simple black blouse and a very short black skirt that showed off their Cutie Marks prominently. Two of them currently worked the bar itself, carrying multiple trays laden with empty glasses which they were busily placing on the bar counter and replacing with full ones that the bartender rapidly filled. Dozens upon dozens of tiny papers, each of which were covered with fine black writing, loaded down their white aprons.

Briarthorn eagerly led the gaggle of mares and Flathoof over to the corner, where a single, large empty table sat surrounded by a booth. On his way by, a few ponies here and there pointed in his direction and began to whisper, causing the mares and Flathoof to murmur amongst themselves as well in curiosity. In the opposite corner, a jukebox played some hard guitar number that kept the innumerable conversations in the room loud and jumbled. Briarthorn, to nopony's surprise, took the seat opposite the booth's exit between Twilight and Rarity. Tick Tock immediately sat beside Twilight and defensively scooted the other unicorn closer to herself and further from Briarthorn.

“Compared to the exterior, you’ve gotta admit that the place has some style, yeah?” Briarthorn asked with a giant grin.

Rarity hummed and looked around more diligently now that she was seated and had no need to worry about tripping over her cape. “Well,” she admitted, “I’ll admit, on the inside it certainly had a totally different level of class and sophistication than I guessed from the exterior. I was expecting a rough and tumble *dive*, Briarthorn.”

“We’ve got that, but you need to give me a little credit on picking my ambiance,” Briarthorn said as he gestured to the room in presentation, “I like to use a different room for each day of the week. The ‘Authentic Seedy Dive’ is Tuesday. Today’s Friday, and I typically do salty drinks with a pack of ladies - I mean *Margaritas*, jeez, you ponies need to stop giving me death glares, sometimes I let innuendos go! Subtlety for the obvious, remember? Anyway, ‘Ye Olde Pub’ would be my room for this evening, but I think we can all agree this is a special occasion! I’ll gladly stick with the ‘Friends and Family’ room. Appropriate, yes?”

He whistled, waving his hoof to get the attention of the waitress that was nearest their table. As soon as she saw him, she quite nearly bounded over to their table without a second of hesitation, her neatly braided mane and tail bouncing in her wake. Her Cutie Mark was a bread roll slathered with a melted square of butter accompanied by an oozing honey dipper.

“Well, now, if it ain’t Briarthorn himself,” the mare spoke above the din with a friendly tone, “What can I start ya wit’, shug? Am I puttin’ all yer friends on yer tab too? An’ jus’ look at y’all, an’ all yer fancy outfits! You brought a party wit’ ya tonight, shug.”

Briarthorn beamed. “Honey Buns! Sugar, sweetheart, baby doll! It’s been too long! So glad to see you. Had a dream... or three of you; at least one dream *with* three of you. Was reminiscing about old times. It’s just been such a tiring while since we’ve last crossed paths, *Lady Buns rotund*. How long has it been since we were last together? Yesterday, right? Yeah, sorry I left so suddenly. Duty called! To make it up to you, I’ve brought you a crowd of shiny new faces! But let’s be gentle. Start off with a round of Beginner’s Lucks. I gotta gauge how light these weights are. After that, who knows?”

Honey Buns laughed as she jotted down his order, “You got it, shug,”

As she walked away, Briarthorn’s head tilted side to side in tune with her very pronounced sashaying backside. He suddenly perked up. “Ooh. Wait, you guys remember Cutlass? He wanted a ‘good word’ with that well-endowed mare. Pinkie, Tickety, anypony really, help me out here at some point. Think of a good one. Not yet, not yet, but I’ve gotta see to it to put in a ‘good word’ with her for Cutlass. A really ‘good word’. Remind me at some point. I promised I would, and I keep my promises. That’s at least one thing to fit onto the sticky note of things I can be reliably relied upon for.”

“I thought the one thing you were reliable on was hitting on everything that moved,” Rainbow scoffed.

“Several ponies past their drink limit go into stupors that makes them seem like they’ve had terrible body-seizing strokes. Frozen solid. Doesn’t stop me,” Briarthorn shrugged, “Just make sure that as you drink, keep being sure to be as disgusted with me as I can tell you are. Keep that focus up, or otherwise, who knows how you’ll wake up, my **dear, lithe, and lovely Rainbow Dash**.” His grin spread across his face, making Rainbow Dash tense up in anger. As she was about to interject, he looked at her very sternly. “But seriously, keep your focus. I can tell you guys aren’t exactly... old pros. I mean. Body language that *I* can interpret? Yeesh. I know some of you know your way around a bar, but still! You’re lucky the Queen’s in a bad mood and that she’s like the only pony I know that *doesn’t* drink when she’s in a bad mood. If she’d come down here today, she’d already be pissed *and* laughing at you from the looks on your faces, and you wouldn’t know to treasure the rare gift of Her Royal Highness’s drunken giggles when she’s completely face-plowed by her baker’s *dozen* ‘Gunpowder’s Guzzler’. If you’re curious, don’t be. I have no idea why she likes the stuff. That’s coming from *me*, folks.”

“These folks don’t seem so gung-ho about giving you problems over a tab,” Tick Tock noted dubiously.

Applejack nodded. “Y’all even threw all o’ us on yers like it was nothin’, and that there waitress didn’t even bat an eye at it. What gives?”

“That’s another thing the Queen does right,” Briarthorn said fondly, “As a pilot, Her Royal Highness herself ensures that I get free drinks. Part of the perks of the job, y’see. Us pilots? We like to celebrate with a couple *dozen* drinks every time we come back from a mission not dead and not *undead*. Her Majesty’s seen some of the scraps we’ve been in, and so she keeps us happy on the alcohol front.”

Moments later, Honey Buns returned with the drinks they’d ordered, placing them all around the table at once with all the practiced dexterity of a unicorn waitress. The dirty brown liquid made a few of the ponies look on in dejection while a few others looked on in anticipation. Rainbow Dash grabbed her glass with both hooves and was rewarded with a huge elbow to the side from Pinkie for her trouble. The pink pony gestured towards the rest of the group subtly with a tilt of her head to show that nopony else had even picked up their glasses, even Briarthorn.

Rarity looked particularly dismayed at the sight before her. “Um...” she coughed, “If I may trouble you, my dear? So sorry to make you take this back, but this sort of drink really isn’t *me*, as t’were. I prefer wine, if you have any?”

Honey Buns, her face completely professional and not at all upset, was about to take

Rarity's drink back when Briarthorn grabbed it first. "Yoink! I'm gonna need more than a few of these anyway. Babby's first swillwater," he chuckled, "Go ahead and take the lovely lady's order, Honey. I guess I didn't consider that some of my guests would have more *refined* tastes," he added with a sly grin.

Honey Buns shrugged and took out her notepad. "Well alrighty then, what'll it be, ma'am? We've got red grape, white grape, orange, blood orange, cranberry, raspberry, boysenberry, cherry, black cherry, grapefruit, strawberry, blueberry--"

"Goodness, that's one heck of a wine list," Tick Tock whistled.

"Purpleberry, trillberry, snozzberry, mapleberry, aaaaand honey fruit, my personal favorite. Whew! Golly I love goin' through that whole list. We're awful proud o' our selection."

Rarity looked disappointed. "Oh... no magmaberry?"

Honey Buns clapped herself on the forehead. "Dagnabbit, I *always* forget that one! Not a very common order, see? Most ponies can't stand the taste, it's a lil' bit on the spicy side. Would'ya like some? I can't say we've got much, an' there's a limit on how much we allow ya ta have, too."

Rarity excitedly clapped her hooves. "Oh, magmaberry, most definitely! I've been so eager to try it for myself, and seeing as we lost all of our seeds back in Goldridge, I've lamented that I'd never get the chance."

"I'll take some of the snozzberry, please." Everypony turned to Pinkie Pie as she spoke. She looked around and raised an eyebrow. "What?"

"*You're* not gonna drink with us?" Applejack balked, "Y'all're stickin' with the prissy drinkin' like *Rarity*? I... no, who are ya and what have y'all done with Pinkie Pie?"

"Oh come *on*, you guys! I'm a social drinker!" Pinkie giggled, "Just ask Dashie, she knows I don't drink at parties except for the very light stuff. I've got a pretty high tolerance for wine, see. Love the stuff."

"That's... no, that makes no bleedin' sense whatsoever," Tick Tock said, "You? The party animal? You don't drink?"

"Exactly!" Pinkie said pointedly, "I'm the party animal at your *average* shindig, but when alcohol is involved? I don't *need* to be the party animal. Everypony else takes care of that just fine without me, it's more fun to be sober-*ish* and watch everypony else act like goofballs than to join in myself. Now Dashie, that's not her *at all*," she added with a wink as she slid her drink to Rainbow, "She'll drink *anything*. This one time, I swear, she spilled her cider on the floor and--"

“Whoa, hey, t-that was a one-time thing, Pinks,” Rainbow nervously chuckled, “It’s not like I spilled it *on-purpose* or anything, right? C’mon, nopony wastes Applejack’s famous moonshine cider!”

“I’m going to turn mine down as well,” Flathoof said, pushing his drink aside to Applejack.

Applejack’s jaw dropped. “Wait... what? Y’all ain’t drinkin’ neither?”

“Nnnnope,” Flathoof said with a proud grin.

Briarthorn looked surprised as well, even as he leaned out over the table, sliding both Pinkie’s and Flathoof’s mugs to himself with his wings before either of them noticed. “You want wine, too? Big guy, you look like you could pack down an entire keg and not even *start* sweating booze. Come on, what’s your poison? Any weird tastes we should know about, Buff Drinklots?”

Flathoof chuckled, “See, now you know why I took offense to that one. I’m a teetotaller.”

“That’s a rare order, but we’ve got it! One brandy-laced tea, coming up,” Briarthorn laughed, pointing at Honey Buns in preparation to order.

“No... that’s... what? That’s not what a teetotaller is,” Flathoof said quickly, “It means I don’t drink alcohol. At all.”

The entire room went deathly silent. This included the jukebox, which just happened to skip at that exact moment with a very loud screeching sound. A glass could be heard breaking somewhere near the bar area; the bartender had dropped a glass he was polishing with a rag. Flathoof nervously slinked back into his seat as everypony in the room turned to face him.

Briarthorn’s jaw dropped. “You... don’t... *drink*? Can that...? Can that sentence happen? I... I always knew that those three words were *words*... I just never thought you could put them together, like, in that order. Like ‘I am asleep’, or ‘I just died!’ You... don’t drink anything? At all? Ever? Nothing? Nada? Zilch?”

“Nnnnope.”

“You... *poor bastard*. And... you *don’t want to start*?”

“Nnnnope. Why is this so hard to understand?” Flathoof nervously asked, as the entire bar was now staring at him like he was from the moon.

“Are you from the moon?” Briarthorn asked very seriously, reaching towards one of his pockets.

“What? No!” Flathoof huffed.

“Dark wizard curse?” Briarthorn’s hoof now moved towards a different pocket.

“No.”

“Obscure liver disorder?” A different pocket yet again.

“No!”

“Did booze *rape yer paw* and *shewt yer maw*?” he asked, earning an annoyed look from both Applejack and Honey Buns, the latter of which used the offense to slide away from the table momentarily.

“By the stars boy, no!” Flathoof exclaimed, “It’s a conscious decision!”

“Yeah, technically speaking. Technically. Like-” Briarthorn made his forehooves and wings assume right angles, and began turning back and forth with a deadpan expression. “*Beep boop bop I am a ponybot. I don’t drink. Error! Error! Does not compute! Does not compute!*”

Honey Buns interrupted the back-and-forth by returning with two glasses of wine for Pinkie and Rarity. “Here you are, dears. Um... and here’s a glass of milk,” she chuckled nervously as she floated over a glass to Flathoof, looking like she was feeding a wild, rabid, pregnant Gargantuan, “Y’all seem the type ta want milk over water, shug.”

“Well thank you, ma’am,” Flathoof nodded in approval, “Sorry if I got everypony riled up...”

By now the rest of the room had returned to normal as well, including the jukebox which was now playing an upbeat pop tune. Shaking off the stupor, Briarthorn lifted one of his now four glasses into the air. “Despite having some kind of superfreak, superfreak, he’s superfreaky dude at the table, he’s still got a glass, which means we can still all toast! To Lockwood’s health, and to the wonderful, lovely mare that he owes so much to, Twilight Sparkle!”

“Cheers,” Tick Tock added.

He tucked a wing around Twilight to pull her into a hug and clanged his glass with hers. The others followed suit with whoever was closest with them, leaving a very disgruntled Tick Tock all alone as her toasting partner had been snatched away. Toast complete, Fluttershy, Flathoof, Pinkie, Rarity, and Twilight all took small sips of the drinks they had in front of them. Briarthorn, to no pony’s surprise, chugged all four of his down in quick succession, not stopping once as he slid them along with both forehooves and wingtips like a drunken conveyer belt,

barely shuffling the wing that had Twilight pressed into him as he went. Applejack and Rainbow Dash were just behind him, but the two both turned in surprise just before they finished theirs to see Tick Tock slam her glass on the table, having finished ahead of them almost as quickly as he had.

“Bloody hell that is the *weakest* damned bitter I’ve ever had!” Tick Tock snorted, “Oy, Briarthorn, I thought you said we were going drinking, not swimming in the kiddie pool. Seriously mate, this tastes like ruddy *Utopian* beer.”

The pegasus belched in reproach. “What did I call this brew again? *Beginner’s Luck*. You’re seasoned, huh? Like a bad pasta, too much paprika. You some kinda old-thymer? *Heyo!* Let’s kick it up a notch, then! *Buh-Bam!*”

Fluttershy nervously slid her glass forward after finishing it, and hiccuped into her hoof quietly. “Oh... um... I think I’m going to stick with these, if that’s okay? I’d like to try and keep an eye on the clock, if you don’t mind?” She turned her head to face the clock on the nearby wall, watching it intently. Only a few hours to go.

“You don’t need to continue, darling,” Rarity said sweetly, “Join Pinkie and I in some of the lighter side of drinking, hmm? Or maybe dear Flathoof’s style is more your speed?”

“Oh... n-no, I want to participate just like everypony else,” she quickly dismissed, “I just don’t want to switch to the stronger stuff.”

Twilight placed her glass on the table too, and immediately turned against Briarthorn and slurred in his face, “Oh wow, dish ish good shtuff! It hash a weird aftertashte to it. I don’t tashte a cherry dough.” Her eyes were already a little glazed.

Tick Tock immediately put a hoof to her face. “Bloody lightweight...”

“Oh, that’s right! Young lady, we’ve gotta make sure you’re allowed to have this!” Briarthorn said, like he was almost seriously attempting to be stern with the unicorn at his side. He let out a whistle and Honey Buns was immediately back over to the table.

“You called, shug? Say! I figured *you’d* be done, but land’s sakes, everypony at the table’s well along too! I’ll getcha another round, an’-” She stopped when Briarthorn pulled himself up, and Twilight with him, so that they were almost standing on the table.

His voice cut across the noise, addressing the room with a sudden surge of command. “Honey Ba-ba, ba-buns, my dear-dear-dear, we have to check this suspicious young filly! I need a Youth Ticket, stat! If she pukes, she’s goin’ home! Ladies and gentlecolts, we might have a *social climber* in our midst! Let’s see if she’s all she’s cracked up to be, or just a big lying baby!”

Cries of “Test her!” quickly became a chant from the nearby bar patrons, and spread until it had filled the entire bar. The bartender, from across the room, magically tossed a cherry towards their table in an expert long-cherry-bomb pass that he’d clearly practiced many times. Honey Buns expertly swirled around a drink that was slid to her across simultaneously, landing it in front of Twilight just as the cherry landed with a splash into the stein. A golf clap spread throughout the crowd.

“*Kerplonk!* All in one go!” Briarthorn grinned. He signalled Honey Buns for a new round of a stronger brew for himself, Rainbow, Applejack, and Tick Tock and another Beginner’s Luck for Fluttershy and Twilight with a surprisingly elaborate hoof-gesture, pointing them out separately from the group even as he pat Twilight on the back with his other, like a practiced stage magician.

Twilight nervously took her glass into her hooves, having lost all confidence for magical control. She tilted the glass back, back, back, and downed the entire contents, then swallowed loudly. The bar grew quiet. Twilight looked queasy for a moment, opened her mouth...

The burp echoed through the room

The crowd began to cheer, “Legal!”

Briarthorn held up one of Twilight’s hooves as the bartender, across the room, hit a large bell twice with a tiny hammer. “We have a winner! A round for the house from me to you for her! Let’s hear it for Twilight Sparkle!”

Another cheer erupted throughout the bar. Honey Buns arrived at their table with another set of drinks for those who were moving up through the bar’s selection and another of the weaker brand for Fluttershy and Twilight, who was quite eagerly still participating in the cheering. The liquid in the glasses placed before the four stronger drinkers was a reddish-brown with what looked like bits of dirt floating in it. Rainbow sniffed hers warily and her lips curled in revulsion, but Applejack simply took hers in hoof while Tick Tock followed suit with her magic, and raised them along with Briarthorn. Rainbow hastily followed suit, giving a nervous look to Pinkie that disappeared the second the other three lifted their glasses to their lips. All four of them drank them down in one go, though Rainbow barely kept up and had to cough a little into her glass to keep the others from seeing it. The booze tasted like somepony had left some grapes out a little too long in the sun, tried to make beer out of the result, and, just for good measure, threw a handful of sawdust in the mix thinking it would somehow soak up the terrible taste. It didn’t.

“Makes you hate yourself a little bit, doesn’t it? Isn’t it *spectacular?*” Briarthorn sighed over at the mares partaking with him, clicking his tongue along his lips with satisfaction.

“Now *that*, is a *pint*,” Tick Tock breathed, “My dear mentor Zenith always said, ‘the worse

a beer tastes, the better it makes you feel', and I tell ya that old bloke knew what he was bloody well talking about. That went straight to my brain, it did."

"Kinda fruity, in a bad way," Applejack commented, "I dunno, I'm more fer the stuff that goes down smooth. I figure if'n y'all had a hard day, the last thing ya want is fer yer beer ta give ya a hard time goin' down."

"I suppose," Tick Tock shrugged, "Some ponies just can't stomach the rougher brews. No shame in it, it's an acquired taste after all."

"Oh... y-yeah!" Rainbow hastily added, "Yeah, this stuff... wow, yuck, tastes like dirt raisins."

Briarthorn chuckled, "Oh, do the little rainbow *and* miss southern comfort want *smooth*? *Humour* them, Tickety. We'll give 'em *smooth*."

Briarthorn whistle-gestured again at Honey Buns, who instantly headed back to the bar and placed their orders, as well as ordering another for Twilight and Fluttershy who, despite drinking the weaker stuff, were still actively participating in the rounds. Twilight giggled and snorted after she finished hers, giving a loud cheer after placing her empty glass on the table.

"I am *astounded* at what I am seeing," Rarity said pointedly as she took her third sip of still her first glass of wine, "Applejack and Rainbow Dash I expected to be heavy drinkers, but *you*, Tick Tock? I honestly never pegged you for the drinking type whatsoever."

"There's more to me than meets the eye," Tick Tock smiled, "Bit of a Chronomancer slogan. If there's one thing I miss about being in the city, it's being able to get sloshed whenever I want. In fact, before I met all of you I'd just gotten off a tough job and planned on hitting this one pub up in the northern Outer District I'm quite fond of, getting bloody piss-faced, then coming home and passing out. I'm bloody well owed a night like that, and damn it all if that night isn't tonight!" She saw Briarthorn staring at her, both hooves on his chin, fluttering his eyelashes dramatically. "What?"

"You're all invited to our wedding," he said with a dreamy sigh, causing the whole table to rock with laughter. Even Tick Tock herself joined in, despite her eye-rolling.

"Heavens, you are just *full* of surprises, aren't you dear?" Rarity said, her tone a bizarre mixture of fondness and disappointment. She took a sip of wine from the new glass Honey Buns had just provided seconds earlier, her second. "My, and the service here is just exquisite. This is better than most restaurants I've been too."

"The Buns sisters are the best in the biz," Briarthorn said fondly, "All's lovely *mares*, who shows that they *cares*. I'm a solid customer, as surprising as that is to none of you, so they're

always sweet on me. You can't ask for much more in a bar. Y'know, aside from the alcohol of course."

"I'll be honest, off the bat I can't really tell the difference between her and the other two..." Flathoof admitted, "They're triplets, aren't they? They certainly look related."

"Come on, that's not hard: you've just gotta watch their backsides," Briarthorn said piously.

"Ah, right. Cutie Marks," Flathoof nodded, "I suppose that makes-

"Sure! I guess that works too," Briarthorn shrugged, "Honey Buns has just the most gorgeous rear I've ever seen on a pony. I'd *adore* getting her in and out of those nice *applebottom jeans*, y'know, the kind of which our dear Applejack is so fond."

Applejack snorted, "Jus' keep yer eyes ta yerself there, wingnut."

Briarthorn stared into her eyes for a moment, and then continued as if she hadn't said anything. "Her sister over there," he said, pointing at the mare currently speaking with Honey Buns at the bar, "That's Cinnamon Buns. Her game is her horn. A little bigger than your average unicorn. Generally, that's a unicorn *thing*, but if you've got protection... she can make ponies *sing*. She's not really a go-getter, though, so it'd be a rare treat to get her into a nice pony pile."

Briarthorn pointed unerringly before he even looked through the filled tables at the third sister. "And that's Saffron Buns. She's a peach, a real dynamo, but *her* special something isn't something you look at. You need to *talk* to her to figure her specialty. But that's enough talk on the rooms' Buns-in-the-round. We've got our own round incoming!"

The next round came through, and as before, the five mares and one stallion grabbed their glasses and pounded them back without hesitation. Rainbow let out a sigh of relief. She was a lot more comfortable this time with joining in alongside Applejack, who'd always been her drinking partner, but Dash never knew the cowpony was so much better than her at this. The beer had been bright gold, and as Applejack smacked her lips greedily it was clear that it had probably tasted like gold too.

"Hoo-wee, that hits the spot!" Applejack chuckled, "That dang near tasted like cider, I tell ya what. Closest thing I've had to an apple since we got ta this dang hellhole continent, pardon mah language. Don't that just go down smooth-like, Rainbow?"

"It's not as good as *your* cider though, AJ," Rainbow nodded appreciatively, "But yeah, I could handle drinking more of these."

Tick Tock shrugged. "To each her own, I suppose. It tastes fine, yes, sure, but blimey,

where's the bloody kick to it? If I wanted tasty, I'd be drinking tea. When I'm *drinking*, I like to feel a little sorry for myself when I'm done."

"With all that braggin' y'all're doin', ya'd think y'all were tryin' ta flirt with Briarthorn," Applejack chuckled. Tick Tock shot her an incredibly sour look, ignoring the bright smile coming from the aforementioned pegasus.

Briarthorn reared back with an amicable whoop. "You girls aren't just trauma-drinking yourselves, I think you might actually have a *tolerance*! That's a beautiful thing, when a lady lets her make-up run from the beer *coursing* in her veins. Here I was, thinking that when we'd get here, I'd have to pace myself better and tell you stories for the first six hours. I gotta say that, honest to stars and skies above, I thought it'd be the big guy and me bonding over a nice pint or four, but whoo! We can't be right all the time. If even a broken watch can be *right* twice a day, I'm allowed to be *wrong* twice. The *right* mistake was the only one *left* though, wasn't it, Tickety? I still can't *believe* that horse crap." He took a deep breath in an attempt to say the offending words, "I don't..." Man! Let me try again. 'I... don't... d-d-d-d-dammit! Yeesh. I just. I just can't get it out. Those are words I just *cannot* parse together."

"Oh, ha ha," Flathoof snorted as he downed his second glass of milk. With a contented sigh, he placed it back onto the table where Honey Buns diligently refilled it along with Rarity and Pinkie's drinks.

"Shay, Briarshorn?" Twilight slurred from under Briarthorn's wing as she leaned into him heavily, "I wash jusht shinking of shomeshing. Now dat Lockwood ish better, can we go shee da Queen tomorrow?"

"Leave it to Twilight, still able to keep a clear head even when totally out of it and slurring her tongue off," Pinkie said with a shake of her head, taking a sip of her second glass, "Another reason I don't drink: Can't talk worth a darn. How am I supposed to tell funny jokes when my words are all incoherent?!"

"By planning on how you'll *be* incoherent!" Briarthorn gently chastised with a grin, before Twilight began poking him with a hoof. He sighed dramatically and pulled Twilight into his wing more firmly. "Now, Twily, I can take you to visit the Queen and soon, certainly, but I doubt that you, me, and most everyone else here will be really wanting to go through that, especially tomorrow, what with the hangovers some of *you* will be getting. The Queen's really busy lately with events in the past week or so, it's been tough getting anypony in to book passages out across the Belt. I was gonna wait at least another day before I called us in for her."

"If we could, I'd like to leave ash soon as possible," Twilight giggled against the smuggler. Briarthorn grinned at Tick Tock again, wiggling his eyebrows in a plain dare. "Oh wow, dose drinksh were yummmmy. Hee hee, I'm gonna hafta write a letter to da Prinshesh when we get home... 'Dear Prinshesh Celeshia: Drinking ish fun!' Hee hee..."

“Twilight, you are the worst drunk ever,” Tick Tock said frankly as she pulled Twilight out of Briarthorn’s wing and back over to lean into her instead. Briarthorn merely stretched the wing out over the back of the seats, so that Twilight and Tick Tock were both demonstrably in its reach. He flicked Tick Tock’s ear with his primary, teasing her. She stuck out her tongue at him.

“Despite Twilight’s... inebriation,” Rarity coughed loudly, attempting to keep the conversation on topic, “She does have a point. The sooner we leave, the better. If I may make a long story short, we only have, at best, another seven days before we have to be home. Isn’t that right Tick Tock?”

“Assuming that all the readings are still accurate and nothing has changed, yes, seven days sounds about accurate,” Tick Tock agreed, batting Briarthorn’s feather away as it attempted to flick her again.

Briarthorn pulled away from teasing Tick Tock and leaned towards Rarity. He gave her a half-lidded, unruffled look. “Am I allowed to know yet why you guys need to get out of here so quickly that you want me to go rushing headlong into dealing with my boss, who is eager and willing to chew on my head a while before biting it off and spitting it out?” he said, crossing his hooves. He leaned back, still occasionally flicking Tick Tock. Her eyes narrowed as she mimicked him, crossing her hooves and leaning back heavily on the wingtip, earning a grunt of dulled discomfort. Twilight began giggling, and Tick Tock giggled a bit with her.

“Is it... alright if we *don’t*, just now?” Rarity chuckled nervously, still trying to keep the table focused, “It’s a rather long and unbelievable tale, and we’d rather not have to go through it multiple times. If you’re able to get us audience with your Queen, we’d likely have to explain it to her anyway, so why not see to it that we see her quickly so you can hear the story for yourself? And besides, it’s not exactly a pleasant story, certainly not something we should be bringing up while trying to celebrate.”

Briarthorn hummed and flicked Tick Tock on the horn before quickly pulling the wing back against his side. “Eh. *Eh*. I suppose, I suppose. She’ll get it out of you, I know that. I just wanted to, y’know, help you deal with her. But sure! If you want to go it alone, don’t say I didn’t warn you. I like a little mystery anyway,” he added with a wiggle of his eyebrows. He paused then pursed his lips. “But that doesn’t mean I’m not *curious*, and it’s going to take all my efforts to get her to see you **tomorrow**. I just can’t think...” He suddenly got a very bright, mischievous look to him.

Tick Tock raised an eyebrow. “Um...?”

Briarthorn shot a hoof skyward. “I think I know what I can do to get you all to her faster. The conditions are perfect for a little feather-ruffling. Now, I know I can’t get the Queen to see me so soon given all the crap I’ve pulled under *normal* conditions, and frankly I think she needs

a day or two to cool down given what I've been doing. Buying you food, lodging, clothing, all on her bankroll? I'm not looking forward to it. She'll bitch at me for *undermining her authority* or something, which you all know isn't true, what with my stellar praise of Queenie's work with and around the city. But... with Lockwood showing up near-dead, and furthermore miraculously not dead nor undead, which I believe I've mentioned is something we pride ourselves on all because one of you," he added with a fond pat on Twilight's shoulder, "*One* of you saved his life, which will earn you more points than I think she'll want to admit... I think... I think, I think, I *think*... I can invoke one of our most sacred rites, and ancient customs, and legal traditions that will... if not trump her authority outright, should at least impress her enough to hear us out. It's probably the best way to demonstrate sincerity amongst us, this particular custom. We can start immediately."

Pinkie and Rainbow looked at each other, to confirm the others' suspicions. Applejack's eyebrow perked up to match Tick Tock's. Rarity, however, was completely lost.

"What? Right now?" she blinked rapidly, "What manner of tradition are you talking about that we'd do right *now*?"

His face was dead serious, and once again he spoke loudly, above the din, "We're going to have ourselves... a *drinking contest*."

The entire bar went silent once more.

"A... drinkin' contest? Seriously?" Applejack balked, "That is the most danged fool idea I ever heard. Y'all can't be serious."

"Extremely, miss southern comfort," he laughed, "Honey Buns!"

The waitress was already dashing over as quickly as she could, fumbling with a small datapad that she'd procured from behind the bar. "I heard ya shug, I heard ya. Gimme a sec, 'kay? This newfangled doohickey always gives me trouble. Why can't we stick ta pen 'n' paper fer this, huh?"

"What's she doing?" Tick Tock asked.

"Why, she's going to be our judge," Briarthorn explained, "She'll keep tabs on the whole thing, make sure it's all legit and official. Honey Buns, dear, sweetheart, love, would you mind explaining the rules for my dear opponents, please?"

"Sure thing, shug," Honey nodded, "It's like this, y'all. The competitors in an official drinkin' contest keep on drinkin' 'til they can't drink no more, that's the first rule. Last pony standin' wins. Second rule is, ya gotta down yer whoooole drink in order ta count it. If ya spill any, if ya spit it out, an' 'specially if ya puke it all back up, ya lose. Simple rules, right? As fer

what happens when ya win, well, winner takes all. Briarthorn, shug, what's the ante here?"

"Oh, we're not playing for money," Briarthorn grinned widely, "Loser has to do whatever the winner wants, simple as that. No cash, no rash, just flavors of favors."

Honey laughed, "Ah, the good ol' 'Slave fer a Day' ante. Popular choice wit' the younger crowds, not usu'lly wit' ponies o' yer persuasion, Briarthorn."

"Not many opportunities to get a whole bunch of day-longs in one go," Briarthorn said, wiggling his eyebrows at Honey Buns, who began to giggle behind one of her hooves.

"Hey now," Applejack said nervously, "Um... that sound mighty shady ta me. We gotta do whatever he says if he wins?"

"An' he's gotta do whatever y'all want if y'all win," Honey continued, "Sound simple 'nough?"

"Piece of cake. You already know what we want, Briarthorn," Tick Tock said firmly, "What about you? What do you want from us? I mean it doesn't take much to guess, but I'd like to have an idea first."

Honey interjected, "Rules say he don't hafta let ya know until the contest is over an' the winner is chosen. If'n y'all can't stomach goin' inta th' unknown like that, then this sorta contest ain't fer y'all."

"They might have an idea of what I want. But let's make it fair for them." Briarthorn's typical conspiracy look sat on his face, and despite the drinks he'd already had, his eyes were bright and clear. "As many of you as you want as a team, against just me. I only win if I'm the last one up. If any one of you outlasts me, your team wins. Sound fair?"

"Fair?" Applejack laughed, "One o' y'all, 'gainst as many o' us we wanna put in 'gainst ya? I dunno, that sounds like y'all're settin' yerself up... fer... why is everypony smilin' at me like that?"

Honey Buns, who could barely contain her laughter, pat Applejack cordially on the shoulder. "Don't take offense here, shug, but y'all're lucky Briarthorn here is givin' ya a chance ta do somethin' like that. Rules say he gets ta pick who he wants ta compete 'gainst in a group like this, but he's lettin' y'all pick who y'all want, and as many as y'all want wit'out any consequence if some o' ya aren't up ta snuff."

"I still don't know how that's funny," Applejack stared.

Honey Buns tilted Applejack's head towards the wall behind the bar, and pointed to it so

that the rest of her group would direct their attention there as well. Applejack's jaw dropped at the sheer amount of gold plaques displayed proudly along the wall like esteemed awards, each of them given for the same thing: "Drunk of the Year". She could see Briarthorn's name on the five most recent plaques, as well as photos of him doing assorted absolutely outrageous activities on a bar table on each one. The most recent one, only given out three months before, had him dancing on the table with a lampshade over his head. In fact, he had that same lampshade over his head in at least half the photographs. Applejack could see said lampshade on a lamp just near the bar, and Briarthorn's name was one of many signed upon it, like a trophy.

Briarthorn chortled very slowly. "So you see, I've got a bit of a reputation. Figure I'd give you all a fair chance at it though. Still up for it? It's the only way I'm gonna hurry that passage request along tomorrow."

"I suppose we have little choice then," Tick Tock hummed.

"You're not *actually* considering going through with this, are you Tick Tock?" Rarity asked, aghast, "Darling, if you lose, he'll-

"Why the bloody hell not?" Tick Tock huffed, "I said I'd get you all home as soon as possible, and I aim to make good on that promise. If I lose, I lose. I assume that only the participants are affected by the contest, yes?"

Briarthorn nodded. "Correct-a-mundo, my *sublimey*. If it's just you and me and you lose, I can't, say, make Rarity take me out for a night on the town. Though, I figure I'd be able to get that without having to force her through cultural mainstay," he smiled as he pat Rarity's hoof. She stared at him expressionlessly, and very slowly pulled her hoof away to replace it on her near-empty third glass.

"Cheers! I can handle it. No harm in trying to wipe the smug little grin on this blighter's face right off, right?" Tick Tock boasted.

"I'm in," Applejack suddenly interjected.

A few of the others stared at her. Flathoof was the first to speak. "Applejack, you don't have to-

"I said, 'I'm in'," she said firmly, "Heck if I'm gonna let our whole chance ta get home sooner ride jus' on Tick Tock. No offense, sugarcube, but we done gone down that road too many times already and had it blow up in our faces. I think it's 'bout time we take some o' the effort ourselves ta do what it takes to get home."

"Well spoken, Applejack," Tick Tock agreed, "Glad to have your support."

"I'm in too!" Rainbow blurted, "This sounds like a competition, and you all know I never back down from a competition, *and* that I never lose. We'll have this in the bag, no problem!"

"Yeah, you tell him Dashie!" Pinkie cheered, "You've got your cheering section all prepped and ready, you're gonna *whup some flank!*"

Briarthorn beamed. "*Most excellent!* The competitors are set. The terms are set. Let's make sure everything else is on the up and up. First, sorry to those of you who aren't partaking in this event, but you're going to have to take seats elsewhere."

"Awww... but I-" Pinkie pouted.

"Sorry, but he's absolutely right," Honey nodded, "Rules say that only competitors are allowed at a contest table ta avoid any possiblity o' cheatin' 'cause somepony passed their drink ta their neighbor wit'out anypony seein' or somethin'. Don't look at me, I don't make the rules, they're only there 'cause somepony actually tried ta do it and got in trouble fer it. Don't y'all worry none, y'all get reserved seats since ya had ta move. Come wit' me."

The non-contestants got up with assorted grumbles, and Honey Buns ushered them over to a nearby table, luckily not having to move anypony to get any seats. They were close enough that they could still watch the contest without worry, and at least now they had more room to sit without crowding in. A rumbling crowd had begun to form around the table they'd just left, leaving a divide for Honey Buns to get through to serve the table drinks.

Briarthorn spoke again, and with a flourish, spread his wings in a grand display of poise. "Well then, while our fantastic bartender prepares our first round, we shall open this contest officially. Honey Buns, doll, dearest, if you would please lead us in tune to sing the ceremonial drinking contest anthem? It's an open and honest tribute to the most lucrative work we do around here. You girls don't need to join in if you don't know it," he added, looking down at them apologetically, "Everypony else in the bar, though! Let's hear some singing here! Up up! Aaaand-"

Honey Buns had taken out a flute from a small box the bartender had slid over to her, and played just a few dozen notes as Briarthorn cleared his throat. When he signaled to her that he was ready, she started to play a tune, and Briarthorn and the crowd sang along.

"♪ *Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate's-*"

Pinkie suddenly jumped up and waved her hooves in a panic. "Whoa whoa whoa, guys! Do you wanna get *sued?! Ex-nay on the Isney-day!* You'll need a *team* of lawyers to get through that kind of trouble!"

Briarthorn blinked in stunned silence, then gave a deep, booming laugh. “Lawyers? *Lawyers?! We’re pirates. A good third of us are at least* paralegals if not practicing attorneys in either *or both* New Pandemonium and Utopian law firms, not to mention our very own local Hope’s Point legal system, which, if you can’t tell by the use of a drinking contest as a legitimate legal wager, is *way messier*. Not to mention the place being a hereditary monarchy only two generations old. I myself practice family law when there aren’t a lot of goods to be shipped. My specialty is specifically divorce proceedings.” Pinkie stared at him, still openly nervous and plainly unconvinced. “Yeesh, okay, okay, okay. Here, look.”

He reached out a wing and grabbed a nearby pony, a very large pegasus stallion. His coat was red and his mane and tail and massive beard were all dark black. He was wearing what could only be described as ‘stereotypical pirate garb’, right down to an eyepatch and a false peg leg. On his shoulder was a small stuffed bird made out of paper-mache.

Briarthorn introduced the burly pegasus. “Ol’ One-Eye here is a lawyer, ain’t ya One-Eye?”

The big pony, in an incredibly deep, gruff voice, replied, “Aye. Passed the *Barrrr exam ‘n’ errrythin’*. Lost me eye in me first case, **yarr**. Tragic and pro bono, loik all the best cases *arrrrrr*. But while Oy lost me eye, Oy *won* me case.”

Briarthorn bowed his head in respect. “See? Now Ol’ One-Eye’s specialty is copyright law. One-Eye. Our official song.”

“Aye, ‘tis a mighty foine song, ‘tis.”

“We’ve got this nice pink lady here saying its origins aren’t public domain, and thus we should live in fear of the owners of that song!”

One-Eye glared with his eponym. “**Yarr!** Now *see here, Miss Pink-Mare*, this ‘ere drinking shanty-tune be bein’ used in *spontaneity*, with no clear indicaterrrs as ter an intent on establishin’ any profit through use of said song, **yarr!** Therefore! With no clear profit motive, ye use of yon song, despoite yer claim to *purportedly* copyroighted origins, if Oy be recallin’ me jurisprudence theory fer interlecteral property, such a use falls under yon jurisdiction an’ protection of yer Fair Use and Parody **Law-rrr!**”

Briarthorn nodded sagely as Pinkie acquiesced with a sincere and thoughtful nod of her own. “A fair and useful point! I mean, where would *I* be if I thought I’d get in trouble for everything *I* do? Still, I’d recommend we only really use one line, that makes it more obvious it’s *homage* rather than *plagiarism*.” Noticing everyone staring at her, she coughed into a hoof. “Never mind me. Go ahead and sing!”

Briarthorn hopped back to the table and gestured for Honey Buns to starting playing her

flute again. “Now! Where *were* we? Oh, right. We didn’t really get to *start*. Ahem...

♪ *Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate's life for me-*”

Applejack leaned over to Tick Tock. “What in the *hay* have we gotten ourselves into this time? Songs? Judges? Rules? This don’t sound like any drinkin’ contest I ever been ta. Sure okay, that there first rule is right on the money - drink ‘till ya drop, last one standin’ wins. But the rest o’ this?”

“Just humor the bloke,” Tick Tock shrugged. “If wiping the smug out of him gets us across the sea faster, we’ll play his little game. Don’t tell me you’re worried, Applejack?”

Applejack snorted, “O’ course not, I’m just mighty weirded out, is all.”

Briarthorn continued the song for a few moments, each other line making the three mares competing against him look at each other with concern. A drinking shanty bragging about looting, pillaging, igniting, extorting, kidnaping, and other unscrupulous activities, did not seem to be very uplifting for decent, *mostly* law-abiding citizens like themselves. When Briarthorn and the crowd finished, he took a flamboyant bow amidst applause from the crowd around them, and as he took his seat, Honey Buns provided the table with four small shot glasses filled with a bright gold, faintly glowing liquid. Without even having to put their noses down to the stuff, Applejack and Rainbow Dash jerked their heads back in disgust at the smell, and Tick Tock wrinkled her nose in repulsion.

“By the stars, what is this stuff?” Tick Tock murmured, eyeing her glass warily, “I know I was talking about getting piss-faced, but moving on to actual piss seems a bit of a joke. Ha bloody ha.”

“This is the house’s most *special* of special brews, unique to Wyrms’ Head. The only pub in the world to have the nerve to serve. A real crowd pleaser,” Briarthorn explained, taking his glass between his hooves and looking into the liquid cautiously but not showing any sign of being affected by the smell, “Hmm... good, good, good. All golden. Not a hint of green in it.”

“What is it?” Applejack asked, still worried about putting her hooves anywhere near the glass in front of her.

“‘Gargantuan Venom’,” Honey Buns said with a pleasant smile, “It’s our strongest home brew, really packs a wallop. Tradition dictates that we serve our strongest stuff fer drinkin’ contests, y’see, so here y’all are. If’n ya wanted somethin’ lighter, well, y’all shoulda gone ta some other bar.”

“‘Gargantuan Venom’? Ha, clever name,” Tick Tock laughed, “I’ve never been a fan of naming drinks in the same manner one names hot sauce. All ‘Dragon Piss’ and whatnot.”

“What’s in it?” Rainbow asked, finally getting the gumption to pick up her glass, very carefully making sure she didn’t spill a drop. She wasn’t so much concerned about losing at this point, more about getting any of the stuff on her coat.

Briarthorn blinked, and winced at them incredulously. “What do you mean, ‘*what’s in it?*’ Gargantuan venom.”

All three mares looked at him for a moment, hoping he was joking. But the expression on his face clearly showed that he wasn’t. Applejack spoke first, desperately hoping he still was. “Y’all’re jokin’... right?”

“He doesn’t look like he’s joking,” Rainbow muttered, “This stuff really has Gargantuan venom in it? No way man, you’re pulling our legs here. That stuff is... deadly, isn’t it? What kind of idiot puts poison in a drink?”

“Yup, sure does, sure is, and just the kinda idiot that made a mint off the purification process!” Honey smiled broadly, “Passed down through the bartender’s family line fer seven generations, and we’re awful proud o’ makin’ the stuff potable, that we are. Even prouder that the doctor folk down in the medical center bought one o’ our distillers to use it fer makin’ that fancy anti-venom they all use.”

Fluttershy, from the table nearby, turned white. “Y-y-you’re j-j-joking... y-you have t-t-to be... you can’t p-p-possibly be using that horrible stuff in a drink...” She fidgeted away from the drinking table, horrified that any of the stuff they were drinking would get anywhere near her. She wasn’t sure if she was still immune to the stuff.

“I assure you, we use one-hundred percent authentic Gargantuan venom to make this here stuff,” Honey said, somewhat hurt that she was being doubted, “Don’t you worry yer lil’ head none, shug, it’s perfectly safe. So long as yer liver’s workin’ right, o’ course. Drink at yer own risk, that’s the warnin’ label on the bottles. The worse it’ll do is what any other brew’ll do if ya drink too much.”

“You’re not scared, right?” Briarthorn snickered, sliding his glass around the table between his hooves without spilling a drop, “If you all want to quit now, go right ahead. Contest has already started though, see? Be a real shame to forfeit before we even had the first round.”

“I don’t even want to know how you manage to collect the special ingredient,” Tick Tock sighed, lifting her own glass, “Let’s just get this over with, do what we came here to do. Bottoms up, ladies.”

Applejack watched as Briarthorn and Tick Tock lifted their glasses to their lips and waited for the others as a show of courtesy. She grunted and followed suit with her own, ignoring the

pungent odor that flowed into her nose like an unwelcome houseguest. “Like I said, hay if I’m gonna leave this whole dang thing ta Tick Tock alone. Let’s do this, flyboy. Y’all picked the wrong mare ta mess with here.”

Rainbow mirrored the other two mares, lifting her own glass with a slight shake. “Yeah... yeah, let’s do this! Woo! Yeah...”

All four downed their tiny glasses and slammed them on the table. All four of them visibly shuddered in disgust at the flavor. Rainbow’s trembling was slightly worse as she coughed and sputtered, but she managed to get it all under control after a moment. She cringed and closed both eyes. She peeked one open to look at Pinkie. Pinkie smiled sweetly and cheered, waving encouragingly. Once she saw Pinkie’s smile, Rainbow breathed a sigh of relief.

“Bloody *hell*,” Tick Tock breathed after a moment, lolling her tongue out in revulsion, “*Potable?* I’ve smelled *piss* more potable than that garbage!”

“I said it was potable, not that it tasted good, shug. That’s what *really* makes it a contest,” Honey snickered, “Next round, comin’ down!”

Four more glasses were placed in front of the contestants, who all eagerly grabbed them and stared at one another with determination. “Hey!” Briarthorn said with a wide smile, “You survived! Guess you’re all *actually* serious about this. I never dreamed something like this might happen. Though I *did* have a dream involving you three last night. We weren’t drinking though - ha ha haaaa, it’s like I’m a *prophet*. You were all actually giving me the stink-eye in my subconscious, too, despite your *compromised positions* in that wonderful little vision. Ooh, those looks might be *worse*. But hey! Don’t get too upset. You might break the rules and lose on a technicality. On that note, here’s something else I said in my dream that pertains to the contest, ***bottoms up!***”

Hours had passed, and by now the table had become literally covered in shot glasses that were now being slowly cleaned out by Honey Buns to make room for new ones. Briarthorn sat on one side of the table, his body swaying slightly and one of his eyes drooped a bit, but otherwise, he was still lucid enough to smile broadly as his next glass was placed in front of him. His eyes tilted to his left, where Honey was carefully setting down another glass in front of Applejack, whose messy mane kept falling into her eyes and had long since been taken out of its neatly-tied style. To his right, a glass was placed in front of Tick Tock, who lazily fumbled with her bow tie to try and get some air. Honey Buns then casually stepped away from the table to allow the competition to continue, giving Briarthorn a clear view of the table where the others were all still seated, minus two.

Rarity, the only semi-sober one left aside from Pinkie, diligently did her best to keep

Twilight upright. Fluttershy and Flathoof were long gone, having left the bar as soon as the clock neared eight, signalling their visit with Lockwood. Fluttershy had dashed out of the bar in the process, but not before downing one quick, final drink before she did so, to Flathoof's confusion. Pinkie Pie, of course, was completely unable to be of any assistance, as she was desperately trying to keep a very, *very* drunk Rainbow Dash from doing anything stupid.

"I *hic* I tell ya Pinksh," Rainbow slurred as she leaned into the pink pony, "It'sh not faaaaaiiiiiirrrrr. Dat Briarshorn, he totally bumped me under da table. Made me shpill my drink, I shwear..."

"Dashie, we *all* saw you fumble that glass. *Above* the table. Besides, Briarthorn was across the table. He'd have to go under the table and *lose* to bump you, Dashie. You *really* should've been cut off like eight rounds ago," Pinkie sighed as she helped Rainbow back into her chair for the third time in the past five minutes, "Look at you, you spilled it all over your brand new jacket."

"It looksh good dough, don't it? Eheh. Heheh... Heeeeeey... hey. Hey Pinksh..." Rainbow garbled with a dumb grin, "You know... you knooooow... your hair ish... sooooooo... *poofy*... poofy-woofy... hee hee..."

"Good heavens, I can't believe we have to handle *two* of them now," Rarity huffed as she rubbed Twilight's back, "At least dear Rainbow has a higher tolerance, but still! I just *knew* this was a bad idea, I just knew it. Twilight here is absolutely out of it, and Rainbow... Rainbow is making a total *foal* out of herself..."

"Hey! Hey!" Rainbow stammered, pointing at Rarity, "You... mmm! Mmm! Wash your name again? Um... Rarity! You... fanshie... panshie... jealous hornshing. You jusht... shushushush!"

"Don't you *shush* me!" Rarity exclaimed indignantly.

"Rainbow Dash, I think I should get you back to the hotel before you do something really *goofy*," Pinkie sighed.

Rainbow brightened immensely, but her smile was still unsteady. "Hotelllll...? Ohhhh, oh I get it. I *get* it! That'sh a good idea. Hee hee, you're right Pinksh, it'sh been a few weeksh now huh? Sinsh we've had any *real* fun... oh Celeshia you have *noooo* ideeeeee how much I *need* to jusht *grab* you... by your poofball *tail* and *then*-"

Pinkie turned bright red when the pegasus started whispering in her ear. She abruptly stopped when Rainbow leaned down and started nibbling at her neck, causing quite a few of the ponies in the bar to look their way in eager anticipation. Briarthorn in particular, who saw them during a lapse in-between rounds, leaned forward and gave a wolf-whistle. Pinkie had to put in a

lot of effort to separate her neck from Rainbow's relentless kissing.

"Hey! Whoa now, Dashie, calm down. Dashie? *Dashie!*" Pinkie grumbled, and pulled a squirt bottle out of her mane and started squirting Rainbow with jets of cold water. "Bad!" *Squirt* "Bad Dashie!" *Squirt squirt squirt* "There are *strangers* watching, Dashie, *not* cool."

"Heeyyyy, come *onnnnn* Pinksh," Rainbow complained as she shook water out of her mane. The dumb grin from before returned in earnest. "Hee hee... oh hey, I jusht realized... hey... hey Pinksh..." She leaned in and whispered, "You got me... *hic* hee hee, hold on hold on... you got me... all... *wet*... ha haaa..." Rainbow then slumped forward and started giggling madly into her hooves.

Pinkie rolled her eyes. "See, *this* is why I don't drink."

Briarthorn, Applejack, and Tick Tock slammed down another set of glasses onto the table, and as they'd done after each round, they stared at one another with the intensity of a raging inferno, each trying to will somepony else into submission. Tick Tock and Applejack even did so to one another, despite being teammates, sizing one another up and daring the other to give up and leave the whole thing to them.

Briarthorn gave a loud laugh. "Man! I'm surprised. It's been a while, lemme tell ya. Getting *thiiiiiiiis* drunk, a rare treat. You ladies are something else. I'm going to *enjoy* winning."

"Heh... *hic* y'all think ya still... *hic* got a chance there, wingnut?" Applejack slurred, "I've got plenty more... *hic* game in me. Y'all ain't gonna *hic* gonna beat me *that* easy..."

"Yeah! You... you tell 'im AJ!" Tick Tock cheered, patting the earth pony on the back, "This bleedin' wanker ain't beating *us*, no sir, no he isn't. I just... woof... wow, I haven't dranked... drunked... dranked this much in years..."

"Yep, you're definitely a special bunch," Briarthorn murmured as he scooted in close to where they were sitting, putting Tick Tock between himself and Applejack. "I... I've got *just* the thing to ask of you, sublimey..." He put a hoof to her ear, mimicking Rainbow Dash's gesture to Pinkie, and whispered intently for several seconds before pulling away.

Tick Tock guffawed. "Oh... oh that's rich, that's a good one. Bloody good show mate, yes, right. I'd like to see you try and make me," she said with a loud hiccup, putting her hooves up in a taunting gesture.

"Rules are rules, *Tickety!*" Briarthorn teased in a sing-song voice.

"Maybe... maybe..." Tick Tock shook her head, "But I've got you... allllll figured out, you tosser. You're this great big flirty thing, don't care if it's a bloke or mare whose tail you're

chasing, yeah yeah, I get that..." She smiled brightly, "But, but, BUT, I know you've got a little bit of heart in you..."

"A little bit?" Briarthorn raised an eyebrow, "If I didn't have a decent heart, my liver would've shriveled like a year ago."

"Yooooo knooow what I'm taaaalking about," Tick Tock slurred, "My guess is, you don't mess around with ponies in monogam... monogram... single-pony relationships, right? You know when some ponies are 'off-limits', eh right?"

Briarthorn hummed, then shook his head. "'Off-limits'? Heh, heh. Heh-heh. That's goofy, Tickety. It's a bit hilarious just how *wrong* you are, miss sublimey. See, the thing is, I'm not picky in the least bit, but my grand logic-" He steadied himself and held up a hoof shakily. "My *grand* logic! Works on a whole 'nother level. Okay, I'll grant you one thing. I don't really prod one part of a relationship... *much*. It ain't really fair. But why? Simple. The way I see it, a couple counts as one unit. That's why it's got its own grammadi... grammakit... *syntax appropriation*. Two ponies together is 'an item', yeah? Here, watch this-" He whistled, "Hey! Heeeyyy Pinkie! Rainbow! Question for you two!"

The pair, who were busy wrestling, with Pinkie trying desperately not to get pinned by an increasingly aggressive Rainbow Dash, turned their attention to him. Pinkie called back, "Yeah? Little busy at the moment! Drunk girlfriend and all!"

"I can help you fix that! What say you two, when we get back to the hotel, we engage in a little, how does the Romantique saying go? *Ménage à trois*? I could help Rainbow stop getting angry at stallions!" His answer came when Rainbow Dash threw Pinkie's half-empty wine glass at him, which he barely tilted his head to avoid, having it smash on the far wall behind him. "Okay, I'm taking that as a 'maybe'!" He turned back to Tick Tock and shrugged, but with a huge smile on his face, "Ya see? Lotta ponies like monogamy. Ya gotta 'right place, right time' 'em to get the double-time going. I've had my fair share of being a benefit-friend for a long line of couples, Tickety."

Tick Tock flustered, but regained her composure rather quickly. "Well then, what about Fluttershy? Why else weren't you hitting on *her* if it wasn't because of her and Lockwood?"

Briarthorn nodded sagely. "That's tricky, I grant you, but think about it. Me getting my mack on with that lovely little buttercup when Lockwood is not only not present, but hospitalized? Come on, do you really think my tool is my primary radar? That's just bad form, see? Sheesh."

"So... you have no problems hitting on ponies in relationships if both are present and if you treat them as one item..." Tick Tock hummed. She suddenly looked very proud of herself and pointed at him, "Ha! Then, I regret to inform you that I *am* in a relationship."

Briarthorn laughed. "This is gonna be good. I want to hear a really plausible name. Remember, I know Lockwood. He knows damn near everypony. Who's the 'bloke' you're romping? Or... hey! Is it a mare? Don't tell me it's Twilight." He grinned at Tick Tock's sudden turning-pink. "That'd be a dream come true. You know I'd have no trouble with her, and enough pestering with you? I'm not that terrible, and you know it. *And* I wouldn't *be* that terrible if the deed were done. Hot damn, if I could manage that one, I'd cross that right off my bucket list. *Ka-chow!* But go on, I'm all ears here. On pins and needles and the edge of my butt."

Tick Tock quickly recovered and chortled, "*His* name is Pewter."

Applejack stared at Tick Tock with disbelief. Briarthorn blinked, and laughed, "'Pewter', huh? Where's your main squeeze gone off to, then, huh? Ain't in Hope's Point, that's for sure."

"You're right, he's not," Tick Tock shrugged, "He maintains the checkpoint to the northwest."

Briarthorn raised an eyebrow. "Wait... the *Goldridge Pass* checkpoint? He's not related to Obsidian, is he?"

"He's his son."

Briarthorn laughed louder. "Really, now? The mountain stallion had a foal, huh? I wonder who the lucky mom was. Obsidian's quasi-famous around here, at least to the ponies working in Queenie's palace. His dad was good friends with the first King, you know? And he was friends with the last King, our dear current Queenie's daddy. They were drinking buddies, appropriately. How is that old so-and-so? You know what, nevermind, you say you and his son are doing the deed huh? Sure. Okay. Alright. That's a nice plausible-sounding idea. I'll buy it." He waved over to Honey Buns for the next round of drinks. "It's not going to stop me entirely, you know. I'm just going to pick apart *his* tastes through *you*, to make sure we both *keep* being honest."

While he was distracted, Tick Tock leaned in close to Applejack and whispered, "I think he bought it..."

"Well yeah, he **hic** he *said* he bought it. Y'all should **hic** tell 'im **hic** tell 'im the **hic** the **hic** truth," Applejack whispered back.

Tick Tock chuckled quietly, "No thanks, I'd rather not have him keep trying to shag me because he thinks I'm single. The flirting, I can deal with. The propositioning, not so much. I feel bad throwing Pewter in there, but he wouldn't mind. I think."

Applejack continued to stare, then shook her head and tried to process the information. Tick Tock *wasn't* together with Flathoof? Well now, it all made sense, didn't it? Despite Rarity's

words all those days ago back at the checkpoint she'd almost never seen the two of them talking together, but she assumed it was because the two were trying to hide their relationship, which was the main reason she disliked the whole thing. Then there was that whole business in Haute Couture's shop; she assumed that Tick Tock was having a laugh as a further attempt to keep their relationship hidden; of course, knowing that that wouldn't have stopped Briarthorn in the least actually made Applejack wonder what the point of that would've been. Now Tick Tock was saying quite plainly that she was single, but Rarity had said she was with *Flathoof*. What was the truth?

Applejack took a deep breath as the next set of glasses came to the table. She'd have to find out what was really going on another time.

As Flathoof and Fluttershy were escorted through a hallway by a helpful member of the hospital staff, they were glad that the ponies here were so helpful and polite. It was just after eight o'clock, and as they came around another corner, the staff pony gestured towards the third door on their left, allowing them to make the rest of the way there themselves. They found the door just fine, what with Lockwood's name appearing on the label upon it. It was open a crack and they could hear a television quietly playing from the other side. Flathoof smiled and pushed the door open, gesturing for Fluttershy to enter first.

She gasped loudly when she saw him, "Oh! Lockwood!"

Lockwood was laying on his back lazily tapping at the remote control on the side of his hospital bed with his hoof. His good wing was tucked neatly in at his side, while his damaged wing was kept in a tight splint just off to the side of the bed so that he couldn't move it himself. A very dull green glow covered him, which was generated by a techno-magic machine attached to the ceiling above his bed. Fluttershy's hooves went to her mouth when she saw that he was wearing a large piece of gauze over his right eye. He was otherwise wearing a clean hospital gown colored a dull pink, opened at his left side to allow his disabled wing plenty of breathing room.

Lockwood brightened immensely when he saw them enter and clicked the television off. "Oh, hey there you two! Thank goodness, I needed some visitors and *soon*," he smiled, "This hospital doesn't get cable, so I can't watch my favorite show. Rotten luck, eh? I'm missing the season finale!"

Fluttershy rushed forward and embraced him, careful not to jostle him and hurt his wing. "Lockwood... you're okay! You're okay..."

"Well of *course* I'm okay, I had the best medical team this side of Pandemonium," he laughed, returning the hug delicately, "Which reminds me, give Twilight a big 'thank you' from

me if you see her before I do, which no doubt you will. I'll still thank her myself, but I want her to know how much she's done for me. They told me she passed out after my surgery was all over. Is she okay? She didn't over-exert herself, did she? I haven't heard anything new about her condition."

"She's fine, Lockwood. Just a little anxiety attack from finishing up what I've been told was a very complicated surgical procedure," Flathoof smiled, "More importantly, how are you? That's the whole reason we came down to check on you. You look great by the way, like you could take on the world."

"I feel like a million bits, give or take," Lockwood laughed, "Doctor Sugarcane says I'll be ready for release by tomorrow morning. They've had this little techno-magic thing running since I got here, and I guess it's accelerating the healing process? Nifty stuff, nothing like I remember in Pandemonium's medical centers." He looked between the two of them and grinned broadly. "And hey now, you've got new clothes too! Good good, glad to see things are being taken care of without me out there."

"We got everything sorted out all nice and neat," Flathoof grinned, "Minus a little... uh... mix-up with a few things. You wouldn't happen to know a Haute Couture, would you?"

"The name doesn't sound familiar. But hey, just look at you, big guy!" Lockwood chuckled, "You and Applejack look like you've got the same tastes, huh? Assuming that she's still wearing what I remember her wearing. And hey, my jacket! You got it all fixed up for me Fluttershy, that's wonderful. Don't worry, you can hang onto it as long as you like."

"Oh... th-thank you," Fluttershy sniffed loudly, "Mister Briarthorn helped us get them. He's very nice."

"Nice, yes. Eccentric would be more accurate," Lockwood laughed, "Speaking of Briarthorn, he's not giving you any *trouble* is he?"

Flathoof rolled his eyes. "Trouble. Right. By that do you mean trying to get into bed with every dang mare in the group, oddly enough *except* Fluttershy? Don't know what the deal with that is. Oh, and he's been after *me* too. I thought *you* were bad about it, but at least *you're* kidding."

Lockwood snorted in mock offense, "Kidding? Oh Flathoof, what a thing to say! Well you're right, that scoundrel has a bad habit of that kind of thing. It took me two months to get him to tone down attempts to jump *my* bones." Fluttershy nervously gulped and tried to keep her wings from flaring as best she could.

Flathoof chuckled, "He's got your sense of humor, but none of your sense of timing or subtlety." He then let out a heavy sigh. "Which reminds *me*. Secret's out, Lockwood. They know

all about you and me.”

Lockwood guffawed, “Fantastic! You *finally* came out of the closet, huh? Glad to have you here with me, now we can stop hiding and be a little more open about it.” Fluttershy’s wings started flaring again and she nervously squeaked as she tried to press them back down. “Are you alright, dear? You’ve been awful fidgety.”

“Oh d-d-don’t mind me,” Fluttershy awkwardly laughed, “I... n-nothing’s wrong here, n-no sir...”

“Lockwood, enough,” Flathoof said, holding up a hoof, “I meant about the *other* you and me, *little* brother.”

“Oh, *that*,” Lockwood smirked, “Briarthorn must’ve really gotten under your skin to make you let *that* little secret slip. Does that mean I can start calling you my big brother best friend forever again? Or would that just make things weird?”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Flathoof balked.

Fluttershy sniffed loudly and interjected. “Lockwood... um... w-what’s the thing over your eye? Are you hurt? Oh no, it’s not something we need to get taken care of is it?!”

Lockwood frowned for a second, then smiled to hide it. “Oh, don’t you worry about it. just a little side-effect of the recovery process, it’s nothing.”

“It’s *not* nothing!” Fluttershy squeaked, “They d-don’t put that sort of bandage there for no good reason. That’s the same eye that... oh... Lockwood...”

“Relax, it’s perfectly fine,” Lockwood nervously chuckled, “You don’t want to see-”

“Don’t you hide anything from me!” she exclaimed.

“Hey now, Fluttershy, take it easy,” Flathoof said gently, “Lockwood’s probably got a good reason for not wanting to show us, don’t you buddy?”

Lockwood frowned again. “Well... if you really want to see, I guess it’s okay. Just... just don’t get all in a panic, alright? It’s not that big of a deal.”

He sighed and lifted the bandage. Fluttershy gasped, her wings drooping back down to normal, and even Flathoof had to step back in surprise. The white of his eye was now a dull red, and his iris and pupil had shrunken down to a small, black circle. Seeing their shocked faces made him frown again, so he replaced the bandage.

“See? Nothing,” he said with a small smile, “They got everything out of my body with Twilight’s help and repaired what damage they could, but some parts of me were... too far damaged to fix. They asked me what I’d like to do about it as far as covering it up. I’m torn between the traditional eyepatch they’ve got in abundance here, weird things look like part of a pirate costume by the way, or just going without.”

“Oh... Lockwood...” Fluttershy sniffed again, “All these terrible things have happened to you...”

Lockwood sighed, “I suppose they told you about my little... disability too, then?”

Fluttershy began to cry and buried her face into his chest. Flathoof took it upon himself to speak for her. “Disability... right. You really know how to downplay everything, don’t you? They told you that you’re never going to be able to fly again. That doesn’t bother you at all?”

“I was never much of a flier anyway,” Lockwood shrugged.

“How do you do it, Lockwood? How do you always stay so damn calm?” Flathoof sighed, “Nothing fazes you. I know of things that happened to you in the city that would make a normal pony spiral into a depression or go mad with anger, but you just shrug it off. Now you find out you’ll never fly again, you just barely survived a near-death experience, and your eye looks like some horror show, and all you can say is ‘oh, I’m fine’? How the hell do you do it?”

Lockwood smiled lightly, “I’m just looking at the big picture here. Okay, sure, I can’t really fly anymore. That’s terrible. Okay, yes, my eye looks like I should be in the next big horror flick. That’s just gross. And yes, alright, I almost died out there, fine. But I’m alive now, aren’t I? I’m alive, and you and all the others are in good condition again. We’ve gotta start looking up, Flathoof.”

Flathoof strode forward and gave Lockwood a big, tight hug, wrapping Fluttershy in it as well. “We were so worried about you. Everypony was. Do you have any idea how much everypony was scared for your life, Lockwood?”

“I appreciate the concern, old buddy, but as you can see,” Lockwood said, gesturing to himself, “I’m fine.” Fluttershy gave another loud sniff. He sighed, “Okay, I’ll admit, I am tremendously sorry that I’ve made you all worry about me as long as I have, but that’s in the past now. It’s not important anymore. What *is* important, what really matters to *me*, is how are all of *you*? I do hope Briarthorn took good care of you all while I was out? I’m afraid I don’t know much about the city layout, but he should’ve given you all a real whirlwind tour.”

Flathoof nodded. “He took us out for a feast at a place he said was owned by a friend of yours? Buns ‘n’ Stuff? The owner was very polite. We went back there for lunch today, even. Didn’t have a feast though, just regular meals. It was wonderful, your friend has a real talent for

the stuff.”

“I knew he’d take you all straight to Cookie Dough,” Lockwood breathed in relief, “A feast, huh? She making good with all the Dolor brands I helped her get? Glad to hear that mare is moving up in the world. Owning her own restaurant and all... that was her dream.” He sighed contently. “I’m glad I was able to help. How about you, Fluttershy, did you enjoy everything? How do you like this place?”

Fluttershy sniffed and wiped away her tears. “W-well, it’s much nicer than... than Pandemonium. Um... everypony here is really... nice. I didn’t know you had friends all the way out here Lockwood.”

Flathoof added, “There are so *many* friends of yours I don’t know anything about, though I suppose after hearing about that Keeneye mare and seeing this Briarthorn fellow, I can see why you’d keep a few things here and there from me.” Flathoof looked very stern for a moment, before his smile betrayed his insincerity. “Associating with counterfeiters and smugglers, huh? What else are you keeping from me? You know I’d never turn you in, Lockwood.”

“I was never worried about *that*,” Lockwood laughed, “I just didn’t want you keeping secrets for everypony, least of all me. I’m sure you’re just burning up inside that you can’t tell anypony around here that you’re a *you-know-what*?”

Flathoof grumbled, “Yeah yeah, you know me too well. I’m proud of my career, despite how everypony here feels about my other coworkers. The sort of thing they’re worried about isn’t my style. But I have to hide it, you know? I feel like I’m being watched constantly. Like somepony’s gonna find out and I’m gonna ruin everything.”

“Don’t worry so much, Flathoof. How many times do I need to tell you you’re a worrywart, huh?” Lockwood said dismissively, “I’ll make sure that doesn’t happen. I may not live here, but I still have my fair share of connections around this place. So don’t worry about it. Okay?”

“Considering that your friend Briarthorn was ready and willing to jump the gun until Tick Tock thought of an excuse for my Cutie Mark, I’m not exactly relieved.” Flathoof rolled his eyes. “Turns out I’m a career criminal now, a terrible one too. How about that? Really glad I was able to remember a few punks I’ve arrested over the years having a similar lifestyle. But enough about that, is there anything we can get you?” he asked with a smile, “Pillow? Water? Anything at all?”

Lockwood was about to decline, but noticed Flathoof’s eyes subtly dart to Fluttershy and back again. He sighed, “Actually yes, I could use an extra pillow to place under my wing. This one here just isn’t fluffy enough. Be a good *big brother* and find a nurse to get one for me, will you? Thanks.”

Flathoof nodded and winked. "Certainly. I'll be back in a flash."

With that, he left the room and turned down the hall, leaving the two pegasi to be alone. After a few moments of awkward silence, only broken up by my Fluttershy's sniffing, Lockwood brushed Fluttershy's drooping mane out of her face.

"Hey... hey now, Fluttershy, you don't need to keep that up, okay? Crying like this doesn't suit a pretty face like yours," he said, lifting her chin so she'd look at him.

She sniffed loudly and shook her head. "How can I *not*? You almost *died* because of-"

"Now, I thought I asked you to stop doing that?" Lockwood sighed.

"No! *No!* I'm *not* going to stop, not until I make amends for it!" Fluttershy blurted, "All of *this*-" she said, gesturing at Lockwood's wing and eye, "Is because... because I was indecisive, because I wasn't assertive enough. Well... well I don't care *what* Rainbow said about those other mares trying to trick us! Havocwing taught me that I shouldn't be a doormat anymore..."

"Hey now... I'm not-" Lockwood started.

"You don't understand..." Fluttershy sniffed loudly, "If... if you hadn't made it... I would never have been able to forgive myself. It's *my fault* you got hurt in the first place, because I wasn't *strong enough*. Well... no more! *No more!* I'm not going to be a weak little pegasus anymore... I'm not going to let the ponies I care about get *hurt* anymore!" Fluttershy stood up, proudly flaring her wings and pointing a hoof into the air. "Starting right now... starting *right now*... I'm going to be more assertive. I'm going to protect my friends. I'm going to protect *you*, and repay you for protecting *me*."

Lockwood smiled lightly, "It's good of you to want to be stronger, Fluttershy. If that's what you want, then I'm sure your friends will support you. I know I do. But you don't need to go through all that on *my* part. I'm not that important."

"To Flathoof you are. To *me* you are," Fluttershy choked.

Lockwood sighed, "I appreciate all the concern you and your friends are giving me. I'm really not used to be doted on so much like this. Not a fan of it, really."

"Um... w-well," Fluttershy gulped, unsure if she should tell him, "Flathoof... told me all about that..."

"He did, did he?" Lockwood nodded, "Figures. There's more to it than that though. Still, I hope you don't think any less of me for the things I've done, or for the way I feel about... certain ponies..."

Fluttershy quickly shook her head. “Oh no, of c-course not! You... you have to live with the upbringing you were given. Not everypony can have a happy childhood. I don’t pity you, though... you’re a strong pony, Lockwood. Flathoof’s right... you just shrug it all off, like... like it was nothing. I wish I could be like that...”

“It’s all a matter of perspective, Fluttershy,” Lockwood smiled, “If all you do is worry about the past, the present will just pass you by.”

“That’s why... that’s why I... I...” Fluttershy took a deep breath. Now or never. “Lockwood... I... I... I-I-I-I-I-I-like you...”

Lockwood turned pink and gave her a very small, hesitant smile. “Oh? Oh. W-well, I... I... like you too, Fluttershy. Um... b-b-” She smiled brightly and hugged him again, sniffing back tears. He chuckled nervously and softly returned it after a second of hesitation. “I... I really don’t know what else to say... right now. I’m touched, Fluttershy... I really am...” His voice dropped, becoming sad. “But listen, there’s something *very* important you should know about me before you start thinking-”

“No... no, I know what I’m doing...” She pulled her head away and sniffed again, rubbing her eyes and drying her tears before looking into his. “Um... w-w-well, this is... d-difficult for me to ask but... I... I really *do* want to make up for everything that’s happened to you, because of me. I want to give you something to help makes up for all that I’ve done...”

“Fluttershy...” Lockwood breathed as she moved in closer.

“Yes?” she responded, her lips inches from his.

“You’ve been drinking,” he said flatly, wrinkling his nose and pulling away a little.

Fluttershy pulled back in surprise, her face red from embarrassment. “Oh... um... y-yes, but... only a little. J-just enough to... to g-give me the confidence I needed...” she admitted, “We were celebrating your recovery, and I didn’t want to not be a part of it. I w-w-wanted to celebrate so much! You’re *okay*, Lockwood... and I was so happy... so happy that I... w-well, um, I didn’t have *that* much...”

“Well you’re not *drunk*, that’s for certain. Briarthorn... that idiot...” Lockwood sighed, “Still, my dear, I have something important to say, and after I say it you might not want to do what you’re thinking about doing right now. It might be best for you rethink this once you’re completely sober and heard me out, okay?”

Fluttershy was taken aback, and she looked genuinely offended. “You... you th-think... that I’m doing this b-b-because of just a little *drink*? That I’m n-not in my right mind?!”

Lockwood frowned. “No. No, of course not. I can see that everything you’re saying and feeling is real... but... I wouldn’t want you to do anything too, uh, *forward*.”

“Forward?” Fluttershy huffed, her wings flaring, “*Forward?! I’ll show you forward!*”

Pinkie Pie breathed a sigh of relief as Rainbow Dash finally slumped forward in her seat, totally exhausted from her repeated attempts to get Pinkie’s armor off. Rainbow now began to snore, so Pinkie knew there’d be no more need for her spray bottle; she put it back into her mane exactly the same way as she’d taken it out. She turned to Rarity and was about to ask her a question about Twilight, who was also slumped forward in her seat, fast asleep, when suddenly her mane let out a small sputter of sparklers, all distinctly colored yellow and pink.

Rarity nearly leapt out of her seat in surprise. “Heavens! Pinkie *really*, you need some way to turn that ridiculous... thing... off?” She suddenly stopped and raised an eyebrow. Her eyes drifted to the snoring Rainbow Dash, then to Pinkie Pie, then back to Rainbow, then to Pinkie again. “Hold on a moment, this seems a little... *misplaced*. Pinkie dear, if Rainbow Dash is unconscious, how is *that* Pinkie Sense happening right now?”

Pinkie crossed her hooves in front of her. “Now see, that’s the bit about my Pinkie Sense I don’t like. When nopony’s around to see it the first time, they don’t know how it works, and of course *no pony* bothers to *ask*. Sheesh. You know what the fireworks *mean*, but you don’t know what they *represent*, see?”

“I’m afraid I don’t quite follow, dear,” Rarity hummed.

Pinkie rolled her eyes. “And that’s what asking questions fixes now, doesn’t it? Well, the fireworks carry a *very* specific color scheme to them,” she explained, pointing at the dwindling yellows and pinks, “So I’ll ask you a question, and you can follow along. Whenever you usually see them, what color are they?”

“Multi-colored,” Rarity said simply. She then corrected herself with a wave of her hoof. “*Rainbow*-colored, to be precise, I suppose.”

Pinkie nodded her head rapidly. “*Precisely*. And, when you usually see them, what’s happening?”

“You and Rainbow Dash are... engaging in a rather *public* display of affection, if I may say so,” Rarity answered, rolling her eyes, “Really Pinkie, all the fireworks do is attract everypony’s attention. Ponies can see it for miles around Ponyville. If you’d just keep yourselves *inside* when you two were doing it, there’d be no issue.”

“Well that’s sort of accidental, I can’t exactly help when Dashie or me feels... uh, affectionate. Dashie’s been real fidgety about showing it lately, but I guess that’s because she didn’t want to announce to our new friends that she and I are... y’know, together. Back at home, she’s much cooler about it. So yeah, public smooches and that’s what happens,” Pinkie continued, “The sparklers are rainbow-colored because Rainbow Dash is smoochin’ somepony she likes, me! If she were smoochin’ somepony she *didn’t* like, I wouldn’t get the fireworks. I don’t know what I’d get, actually. But I know that if she were smoochin’ somepony else she liked a lot and it *wasn’t* me, there’d be fireworks, but they’d make me *super* sad. But I’m not worried about that one little bit. Dashie’s one-hundred- no, *two-hundred* percent loyal! Ahem... but the point is, the fireworks mean that somepony really super important to me is smoochin’ somepony they really really like, and the colors tell me which of those super important ponies it is, and the amount tells me how big of a smooch it is. I never get pink and pink though, because that would be me, and I *already* know when I’m smoochin’ somepony *I* like. *Duh.*”

“Is that so?” Rarity hummed. She stared at the dying fireworks, and her eyes went wide. “Hold on, yellow and pink... Fluttershy!”

Pinkie poked her own nose. “On the nose-y, Rarity. No guesses as to who she’s smoochin’ either. Kind of a small display though. Knowing her, it probably just a little peck.”

Rarity suddenly looked very flustered. “I... I don’t... she actually... but... oh my goodness. Amazing, I didn’t think the poor dear had it in her. And she did it without *any* coaching or prodding from me either.”

“Coaching? Like what, you were gonna stand there and tell her how to use her-” Pinkie started.

“Not what I meant!” Rarity hastily interrupted.

“Well, good for her I say!” Pinkie shrugged, “Though... I’m kinda worried about what’s gonna happen when we have to go home. Can Lockwood even come with us? Will he... want to?”

Rarity frowned. “Yes... I’ve begun taking that into consideration recently as well, and have regretted that perhaps it was... *unfair* of me to try and spur them along. I’m certain they’d have come to this eventually all on their own, but... I haven’t been helping matters any. Sometimes this generosity is a curse. Ofttimes when I want to help somepony dear to me, I think more about whether I *could* rather than whether I *should.*”

Pinkie clapped Rarity on the back reassuringly. “Relax, Rarity. Like Briarthorn said, worrying is for warts, and you’re not a wart, silly! We should be glad for her, right? If she’s with somepony she really really likes, then we should support her in her decision, no matter what

happens, right? That's what friends do!"

"Right... right, I suppose so..." Rarity sighed. She shifted her gaze over to the table in the corner where the three ponies there had taken another swig from another set of glasses. She blanched and rolled her eyes. "Goodness, are those three *still* going at it over there? How are they even *alive* with all that horrible liquor in their bodies! They're killing themselves, surely!"

Tick Tock messily slammed her glass on the counter, burped, and slumped into Applejack. "Oy... oy Jackleapp... Acklejapp... oy *you*, earth pony. I... I think I'm seeing triple over here, eh? Seeing triple, not good. Double, okay; triple, bad."

Applejack gently tried to push Tick Tock off of her but ended up doing it pretty roughly, almost pushing the unicorn into the cushion of the booth opposite her. "Ya... *hic* ya keep yerself... on *hic* on yer own side o' the *hic* the table there Tick *hic* Tick *hic* Tock."

Briarthorn chuckled, his voice terribly slurred, "Ladies, this has been a... has been a pleasure. It's a good one. I mean, the contest. And you gals. You're a good one. Good ones. This is probably... this is... this... it's a highlight of my year so far. Since last month. And it's not even my birthday. Wait. Is it? What's today again? It's still Friday, right? Nope, not my birthday."

Another round was brought over, and Briarthorn and Applejack took theirs in hoof. Tick Tock tried to do the same, but decided against it.

"Oy..." she slurred into Applejack's side, "Oy you... I can't go on here. Seeing triple, that's when I know I've hit my limit. You... you're a... a bloody swell gal. You finish this up eh? Show this bloke who's boss, eh? You gotta... gotta do it for me and Rainbow..." Tick Tock slumped into Applejack, curled up in a ball, and began mumbling to herself.

Applejack beamed. "Well now, don't that *hic* beat all? I reckon... *hic* I reckon that's mah cue... ta *hic* ta beat this here flyboy into *hic* into *hic* into the dirt... metal- *hic* meaty- *hic* matadorically-speakin', o' course..."

Briarthorn lifted his glass to his lips. "Yo, Applejack... y'alright? You ain't... tired yet, are you? Because. See, I have *just* the idea. You'll probably hate yourself. Heh. It's not even that *kinky*, southern comfort. Yeah. I think... hold on hold on, yeah, it'll be me, and you, and Flathoof. I know we'll need real cuffs. You can't just... kiss his Cutie Mark and wish for those." He downed his glass and choked down the liquid just as Applejack started to slowly drink from hers. "But I bet I'd do that first. I bet you'd *love* for him to get out those cuffs on you. Hold ya down-" He took on what would be a fairly accurate imitation of Applejack's voice, if he didn't keep over-emphasizing her accent. "Oh, Flathoof, yew big sta-rong mayn, puh-lease, be gentle, Ah'm so del-ee-cate. No, don't stop, tee~hee~' Tha's... Tha's you, see."

Applejack nearly spit out her drink, but managed to keep it in just barely. She stared at

Briarthorn, who was giggling like a schoolfilly into his hooves. She swallowed her mouthful, and for good measure slammed her glass on the table harder than ever.

“Y’all... *hic* can’t take anythin’ *hic* anythin’ seriously, can *hic* can ya?”

“You... you think I’m not bein’ serious?” Briarthorn smirked, “That big studmuffin’s *gotta... gotta* be *packing* a whole... a... a bunch, and you... back there, you... there, you... were all but *tail-lifting* back in the boutique.” He suddenly barked out a single laugh. “Whew, Bold *Bigflank*, that was a good one, wasn’t it? I’m... generally a director in a good hay-roll, but I dunno. You’d be... you’d be *competing* with me, miss ‘Mine For A Day’. For the *meat of the sandwich*. Whaddya prefer, southern comfort? You wanna be... cowcatcher? I mean. The engineer, or the passenger car? Choo-Choo! Love train... *coming through the tunnel*. Who gets to be Lucky Pierre, huh? You or me. Flathoof doesn’t seem like... like seem he’d... Well, just in case, I’ll ask. You’ve got... room, right? For *both* of us? You aren’t... you... back door, against it, right? Heh. Not if I win, you’re not. Heh... heh... y’know, I’d *pay* to watch that. Hell, I’d *pay* to watch that.” His smile widened immensely. “Oh, but if I win, I’ll get to *do* it for free.”

Applejack’s face fought between green, white, and red, and she tried to push them all down with a fierce glare. “Y’all said *hic* said that... that if’n they weren’t in the *hic* the contest, they wouldn’t be... *hic* they wouldn’t hafta be involved in any o’ yer *hic* o’ yer weirdo schemes.”

“You’re right, *Aaaapplejaaack*, I’m asking *you* to *seeeuuuuuce* *him*,” Briarthorn slurred with a burp and a snicker, “I was ...you gonna... I gonna... make you... to... watch *me* seduce him, buuuuut, no, no, no, this seems *waaaayy* more fun.”

“Ain’t gonna *hic* gonna *hic* ain’t gonna happen there, featherbrain,” Applejack snorted, grabbing the next glass as it appeared, “I ain’t *hic* losin’ no... drinkin’ contest ta no... *hic* no lightweight pegasus, y’hear?”

Briarthorn lifted his next glass, and the two of them chugged them back, slamming them back down on the table and staring at each other with fierce determination. “*Wight... late?* Wash those... those, watch... your insults, comfort southern, they just... mum kite.... just might come back to... bite. Bite you in the *behind*,” he chortled, “Now... where. Where. Where? Where... were we?” He laughed heartily. “You know... I *really do*... think do... really you think you guys... you guys are a fun... bunch. Even... your prude... I mean, if even. I mean, even if your *prudence* is a bit... yo-yang, I mean, terra-eating, I mean *vexing*.” He looked curious for a moment, and then burped loudly. “Oog. I think,” he said, very slowly and carefully, a look of intense thought and concentration on his face, “I think... that the one... before this one... was the one... I wanted... *you* to... *explore*. Because... that one... is... the most...” He suddenly slumped forward on the table. “Fnnnnnnnnnnnnnn zzzzzzzzzzzzzzz...”

Applejack blinked in surprise. Honey Buns trotted over slowly, and nervously poked

Briarthorn in the nose, eliciting nothing more than a weak murmur from him. She looked at Applejack as if the earth pony had just shot him to death.

“Ya... ya beat ‘im...” she muttered.

Applejack nervously looked around herself, as the other patrons that had been watching the contest now all stared at Briarthorn as if he really had suddenly collapsed and died right there on the table.

“Um... *hic* hooray?” she awkwardly chuckled.

Honey Buns suddenly grabbed Applejack’s hoof and lifted it into the air triumphantly. “A winner! We have a winner!”

The bar erupted into cheers.

Rarity and Pinkie both let out relieved sighs. “Phew...” Pinkie breathed, “Well, I guess that means all’s well that end’s well, right? Now we just have to find some way to get everypony back to the hotel. Where’s Flathoof when you need him, huh? With your help, I bet that big ol’ beefcake could carry everypony all by himself.”

Rarity rolled her eyes, “I imagine poor Applejack is going to wake up with a wicked hangover tomorrow. C’est la vie... but it was worth it, right? I do hope she doesn’t suffer any ill effects in the long term from this.” She watched as the crowd gathered eagerly around the contest table, several of the ponies shoving papers and pens forward in demands for Applejack’s autograph. “Well I suppose when all the excitement dies down, we can get back to the hotel and call for room service. I’m feeling a mite peckish, how about you Pinkie?”

“Hungry, yes,” Pinkie nodded appreciatively.

A cheery voice from nearby drew her attention. “Oh my heavens, would you just look at that cape!”

Rarity turned to face the voice and saw a peach-colored pegasus mare approaching her. The mare’s mane and tail were lime green, styled in short waves and highlighted with streaks of yellow. She was wearing a very plain blue blouse and skirt, and had a little gold ribbon in her mane that circled around her ear

The mare put a hoof to the silky material of Rarity’s cape and cooed, “Oooh, this is absolutely beautiful! The faux-ermine looks simply marvelous! And it even feels like real fur. Lovely!”

“I... well, thank you!” Rarity gleefully smiled, “I had a hoof in designing it myself, actually.

One of my best designs yet! Do you like it?"

"Like it? I love it!" the mare smiled, shaking Rarity's hoof, "Oh you simply must tell me where you got it! What's your name, dear?"

"Me? I am Rarity, of course," Rarity laughed, "As for where I acquired it, it's a little hole-in-the-wall boutique just a few blocks south of Buns 'n' Stuff, *La Boutique des Miracles*? The owner, a Mister Haute Couture, is a very friendly and extremely talented tailor. I highly recommend him, he's easily the best tailor I've ever had the fortune with which to work. Why are you so interested in it, dear... oh, I didn't get your name, darling."

"Peach Fuzz," the pegasus said with a nod. She sighed despondently, "As for why I'm interested, my girlfriend and I are having a bit of a spat right now. I thought I'd surprise her and come home wearing something that made me look really stunning, see. Get her... excited? This cape looks stunning enough to knock her right off her hooves!"

Pinkie giggled, "No offense, but if that's what you're looking to do, maybe you should try something a little more... *exotic*?"

Rarity nodded, "I have to agree with Pinkie Pie here, strangely enough. If repairing a broken love is what's troubling you, then nothing helps mend those wounds better than *desire*. Make that mare *want* you! Something enticing, perhaps some lace? Hmm... with your coloration, I'd say that perhaps... black lace would work best, though you may also consider pink. I'd still recommend the same shop for that though, dear. He has quite a wide selection, and I noticed in his back room a few photographs of ponies wearing more... *provocative* wear. I was tempted to have Mister Couture slip one on the tab to bring home with us."

Pinkie smiled slyly. "Oooh, Rarity, is there somepony you're not telling us about? Who do *you* want to look sexy for, huh? Huh huh huh?"

"None of your business, Pinkie," Rarity said, sticking out her tongue, "A lady doesn't kiss and tell. Or... not kiss, and tell, in this case I suppose."

"Oh, are you not from around here?" Peach asked.

"Afraid not, dear. We're actually from... Utopia," Rarity said warily.

"Utopia...?" Peach blinked.

"A rather obscure little town, all sorts of bizarre accents," Rarity hastily added, "Our friend over there, Applejack, she's actually from Utopia proper though, hence her rather *normal* accent. The rest of us, just so bizarre, see? Ah ha ha..."

“Ah, okay,” Peach nodded, “I was wondering about that. The accent, I mean. I’m from Pandemonium myself, see, but I visit Utopia and Hope’s Point often, so I hear a lot of different accents and dialects. If I were to venture a guess, I’d say your pink friend... Pinkie, was it? She sounds like she’s from west Pandemonium, probably Mid-West, North Plaza. My girlfriend is from Mid-West, West Plaza and you have a little similarity there. And you, Miss Rarity... hmm... definitely Inner-District. Probably from the Whiteworth Heights sector. But of course you say you’re all from Utopia, who am I to question it?”

Rarity nervously tugged at the collar of her cape. “Yes, well... um... you say you do a lot of traveling? What brings you to Hope’s Point today, darling?”

“I’m here in town visiting my brother, actually. He works at the power plant, but heavens, I just don’t know *where* it is. I couldn’t find it anywhere around up here, and maps aren’t helping me find it either.”

Rarity smiled. “I believe our guide said there was a power plant on the second underground level, didn’t he Pinkie Pie?”

“And the third,” Pinkie added, “A whole bunch of ‘em! Said they power the shield and everything, super cool.”

“Oh dear, it might take me awhile to find which one he’s at...” She shrugged. “Oh well, I have plenty of time. Thank you so much for your help, girls. And thanks for the advice on where to find that outfit. I really must be going though - ta ta!”

Rarity and Pinkie waved as the mare left, then looked at one another. Pinkie chuckled, “Well see, this city really *does* bring out the best in everypony. She didn’t seem like she was from the Pandemonium we remember at all, does she?”

“Quite a polite mare, yes. She seemed to have a lot on her mind though, poor girl,” Rarity agreed. Twilight, next to her, gave a very sudden and very loud snore. Rarity sighed, “Though I can’t say we’re in any better shape. I have a feeling tomorrow is going to be quite eventful...”