The Great Alicorn Hunt

by RHJunior
Chapter 1

In another time, another place, an alicorn Princess sent her faithful student a final test-- an unfinished spell by the greatest unicorn mage in Equestrian history. After a near-disastrous first effort, the student finally solved the riddle of the spell, completed it, and was transformed (as her mentor had planned) into an alicorn princess.

This is not that time and place.

In this time and place, the time for scheming and plotting by sneaky-pants princesses had come and gone. Twilight Sparkle had finally called the old woman out, and after an emotional tussle (and a good bit of drama) they had reconciled. Twilight was no longer a 'faithful student.' Unicorn or not, she was a peer who could meet Celestia and Luna eye to eye; she was, more importantly, her own mare.

She (and her friends) had consequently been enlightened to a great number of things that her mentor had been playing close to the vest; many secrets of the past, and of the magic of Equestria. Among them, a great number of things about the nature of the Elements of Harmony, how they operated, and how those strange relics were influencing the course of events themselves...her personal perspective was naturally very different.

In brief, the key difference in this time and place was that, when Twilight received a certain notebook by a certain Starswirl the Bearded from a certain Princess, she actually had half a clue as to what she was doing the FIRST time...

"Okay, everypony," Twilight said. "Take your positions on the hexagram." She and the other bearers of the elements stepped into their respective positions on the corners of the diagram Twilight had drawn out on the library floor.

"So what is this spell supposed to do?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"Nopony knows, not even the Princess," Twilight said. "But Celestia said Starswirl the Bearded made the uncompleted version to be used with the Elements of Harmony. So we're the only ones who can figure out what he was trying to do."

"Ah dunno," Applejack said. "Just feels weird, usin' pegasi an' earth ponies to do a unicorn spell."

"Indeed, I've never heard of any spell that used all three tribes of pony," Rarity said, stepping daintily into her place in the diagram. "Of course, I'm no student of the arcane, but--"

"That's what makes it so fascinating," Twilight said eagerly. "It's one thing to say that all three tribes have magic of their own; it's another thing to find an example of all three kinds being used together."

"A-are you sure about this, Twilight?" Fluttershy said nervously, fiddling with her Element. "This could be dangerous."

"Of course, it's perfectly safe," Twilight said confidently. "The diagram will confine the effect of the spell to the hexagram, so we can observe it safely. Now, does everyone have the completed version I wrote out?" The others nodded; there was a bookstand in front of each of them, each with a copy written on a scroll. "Okay, all together now..."
"From one to another, another to one.

A mark of one's destiny singled out alone, UNfulfilled;

From all of us together,

To each of us together,

With the marks of our destinies made one,

and one shared by all without end--"(2)

The library bloomed with light.

There is another dimension that overlays the cosmos of Equestria; a plane of mystic energy and power, a higher wavelength that all Equestrian magic emanates from and expresses into. It is a realm filled with vibrations that are neither sound nor light, yet both, that hum and sing and cascade over one another in a rich and intricate song. The Elements of Harmony, even when quiescent, express themselves on that plane most prominently, constantly sending out these vibrations like waves in an ethereal sea.

There are beings in Equestria (two of them in particular live in a castle in Canterlot) who are sensitive to the musical thrumming on this plane, even in their sleep. When Twilight's revised spell was activated, the non-sound those sensitive beings experienced could best be described as

**THOOM.**

Celestia sat bolt upright in her bed, bedsheets flying in every direction. Every magical nerve in her body from the frogs of her hooves to the tip of her horn was reverberating to the sound/light/color/texture/blastwave that had washed through the thaumatic plane. Her mane was standing out in every direction. She could feel the aftershocks in her teeth.

Even as barely conscious as she was, she knew this was deathly important, a moment that required that she make some profound meaningful statement or other, something ringing of venerable wisdom and cosmic insight.

"Ebbeh," she said.

Her mane still frizzed and her head still ringing like an inside-out bell, she dashed to her balcony, scanning the night with her horn. Her mind was just starting to clear. *I know that sign,* she thought. *It can only be one thing. If I work quickly, I can triangulate the exact location from the thaumatic echoes***

A moment later Luna, her mane frizzed and her feathers askew, landed in a tangle-legged clatter on the balcony next to her. "Sister!" she yelped. "A huge magical explosion has just struck Ponyville! I saw the flash of light from my tower!"

--*Or, that,* Celestia thought to herself, vaguely disgruntled. "It can only be one thing. Quickly, Luna," she said, shaking out her mane. "We must get to Ponyville at once."

Luna nodded. The two teleported in a flash of light.
The Royal Sisters blinked into existence in midair over Ponyville. One would say that they appeared in the air over the Ponyville library, except for the fact that there wasn't a Ponyville library anymore.

In another time and place the casting of Starswirl's last spell had resulted in a single Element bearer ascending, causing her to disappear in a flash of light, leaving behind nothing more damaging than a charred spot on the floor. In this time and place all six bearers had vanished. As could be expected, the side-effects were a trifle more substantial. The great oak tree that had served as the Ponyville library was simply gone, vaporized. All that stood in its place was a blasted, rubble-strewn stump that had once been the ground floor. A gentle fall of leaves, splintery bits of bark, and scorched book pages was just beginning to rain down.

Celestia and Luna landed. Celestia carefully cast a spell to sweep the falling debris out of the air and away from town; no sense letting some poor innocent get a book binding to the head or a chunk of bark in the eye.

The scorched rubble stirred. Some of the splinters and soot shifted to one side, lifted out of the way by a rising trap door. The door flopped to one side with a bang. Out came a rattled-looking owl and a small purple dragon wearing a hard hat. Spike looked around with the air of someone having his expectations confirmed. "Yep, looks about right," he said. "I knew it was a good idea to start napping in the basement the moment she got that book..."

"Spike?" Celestia said.

"Oh, hey, Your Highnesses. Um, call it a hunch but I think Twilight hit a snag on deciphering that spell you sent her."

It was at that precise moment ponies started dropping out of the sky like overripe fruit.

The quiet Ponyville street was suddenly lit brightly as day. Celestia, Luna, Spike and Owlowiscious looked up; six glowing lights had appeared in the sky. Just as suddenly they disappeared with a loud POP, and from each one plummeted an unconscious form that landed with an audible "whump" in the street.

One sat up. It was Rainbow Dash. She groaned and rubbed her head. "Oh, my head," she moaned. She tried to rub her forehead-- only to find her hoof was obstructed. "My... head?" She froze, then prodded around her forehead again, feeling carefully along the protrusion, clear out to the point. Her eyes crossed as she looked up at her new unicorn horn. "Head, head, HEAD! HEAD!"

The pony next to her stirred. "Land o' goshen, Dash, whut're you--" Applejack started to say, when an orange wing-- her own-- fanned out in front of her face. "Great horney toads!!" She jumped to her feet and began turning in circles, first one way then the other, trying to look at her own back where her new wings had sprouted.

"Aah, you got one too!" Dash yelled, pointing at Applejack's forehead. She was correct; the farmpony had a spiral horn poking out from under her hat.

Applejack looked up at her forehead. "AAah! A horn, too? I--I have wings and a horn now??"

Twilight looked at her own fanned wings. "We all do!"

"Oh dear oh dear," Fluttershy gasped, trying to cover her new horn with her wingtips.
"Oh my," Rarity said, flexing her new swan-like pinions. She pirouetted on one hoof, fanning them for best effect. "No need to panic, girls. In fact I think I rather like..." then she glanced over and saw a gleefully grinning Pinkie Pie poking and prodding at her own new wings and unicorn horn.

"Oh boy oh boy oh boy, does this mean I can do magic now too?"

"GOD HAVE MERCY ON OUR SOULS!" Rarity screamed, eyes starting in horror.

Twilight spun around. "Everypony stay calm, just stay calm!" She looked up and saw Celestia and Luna. "Princess Celestia! Princess Luna!" The relief in her voice was boundless. "Am I glad to see you!"

"I can imagine," Celestia said.

Twilight was already starting to spin up into a babbling fit. "I I I don't know what happened, I set the wards so carefully and it should have contained the spell perfectly but the last thing I remember is that blast of light ricocheting back and forth between us and then there was this big sort of non-kaboom and oh Maker is that all that's left of the library?--"

Luna glanced around. Ponies had been awoken by all the light and noise, and slowly but surely were trickling out into the streets to see what was going on. "Celestia ?" she said, warning.

Celestia smiled warmly at her former pupil. "Twilight, I think we have some things to discuss."

Then she looked over the remains of the library, the bemused dragon and shell-shocked owl, the six brand new alicorns, and the rapidly gathering crowd. "...back at the castle," she added, her smile becoming a little fixed. "Everypony ready to teleport? Good. One, two, three..."

With a flash of light all of them disappeared.

1)With a ruler. And a compass (both kinds.) And a blue pencil, overlaid with a Spiffy Quick Waterproof Guaranteed No-Smudge Marker. She was going to need to sand the floor to remove it completely.

2)Yes, I changed it. The canon version seemed to be more about fulfilling one pony's destiny...which made it seem like the spell was about exploiting five other ponies to ascend oneself. Starswirl, I suspect, was a jerkass.

3)To be specific, five orders of magnitude more substantial. Figure that the canonical bang/thermal burst when Twilight was ascended alone was the equivalent of a cherry bomb (about 1/2 gram of gunpowder), scorching a spot on the floor.... with the order of magnitude increasing once per pony added to the ritual, that comes to 5.0*10^6 milligrams, or 50 kilograms of gunpowder. The UN explosion danger area calculator for "bare explosives" gives a minimum safe distance for detonating that much at about 479 meters, or just under half a kilometer in open air. Yeah, that's just about right for blasting a giant oak tree to smoldering splinters. Fortunately subsequent repetitions of the incantation reveal that the heat and blast force is largely contained and directed upward... much to the chagrin of the Royal Sisters, who now have to replace one of the arboretum rooftops in their palace...
Chapter 2

The court of Canterlot Castle was already abuzz. Things had been proceeding as usual, with the Court of the Day handing over the keys, as it were, to the Court of the Night, when both Princesses had suddenly vanished from the palace. No warning had been given, no instructions had been made; they had simply both announced that they would be back shortly, and vanished in twin flashes of light. Word had gone through the palace staff like chain lightning. The heralds and hoofservants were at a loss for what to do; the courtiers and supplicants were either miffed or alarmed as was their natures; the guards were disgruntled that the Princesses had yet again teleported off without them, just underlining-- yet again, dammit-- how damned pointless their jobs were.

Everypony was rushing about the throne room, working their way well into a proper tizzy(1) when there was a loud report and a tremendous flash of light. Celestia and Luna appeared in the middle of the floor... accompanied by (shock horror gasp scream faint) six other alicorns. Every pony in the room froze in wide eyed, slack jawed shock. "By royal decree, the Royal Court for this evening is cancelled," Celestia said firmly. She swept out her wings. "Guards, I want every pony cleared out of this room. Yourselves included."

The captain stepped forward. "Your highness?"

"Leave us." Celestia said, chin raised high. Luna said nothing, simply standing by her sister with her own wings fanned out.

Slowly, at the behest of the guards, the throne room cleared out. The double doors closed behind the last two guards with a hollow boom. Celestia held her pose for another minute. "Are they all gone?" she muttered to her sister.

Luna peered around the throne room, looking carefully for any well-meaning but disobedient servants lingering in hiding. "I think so," she said.

Celestia lowered her wings and sighed with relief. She and Luna looked over the six new alicorns gathered around them, sprawled dizzily on the floor. Then they looked at each other, grins spreading across their faces.

To Twilight's astonishment, Luna broke into the happy hoofy dance.... and Celestia was right behind her. "Eeeeeeee!"

"Yesyesyesyes!"

"It finally happened---"

"YyyyyES!" Celestia and Luna High-hoofed each other.

Twilight watched in astonishment as the most regal ponies she knew proceeded to go into a demented victory dance, squealing and giggling like schoolfillies. At the point they started doing hip-bumps she interrupted. "Princesses? Luna? Celestia? What is this??"

At Twilight's distressed tone, Celestia stopped in mid hip-bump. "Oh, Twilight. Aheh. Um." The diarch of the sun blushed. "Well this is something we have been looking forward to for some time,
and we-- oh stop that Lulu!" She gave her sister-- who was still doing the happy dance-- a hip bump that sent the lunar princess staggering off the dais. "As I was saying... this is an event we have been planning for since, well, since--"

"Since we were fillies!" Luna said as she climbed to her hooves.

"You mean this-- this--" Twilight waved a wing at her still slightly croggled friends. She sat down and groaned in frustration. "Celestiaaaa! I thought we got past that whole 'secret chessmaster planning' thing--!"

"Now Twilight," Celestia chided, "Let me explain." Twilight sighed but complied. "Now when I say we were planning for this, I mean that we have known for ages that it had to happen, sooner or later, and have been patiently waiting for it to happen."

"Beggin' yer pardon, Princess," Applejack managed, "But waiting for what?"

"For other alicorns," Luna interrupted.

"My little ponies, Luna and I have been the only alicorns in existence for literally thousands of years," Celestia said patiently. "Do you imagine we enjoyed being all alone all those centuries?" the Bearers sat back, pondering this. Celestia's face turned somber. "You cannot fathom how lonely it was. All we have had, was each other. My sister's banishment-- you have no idea how close it came to undoing me entirely." Luna stepped forward and nuzzled her, comforting. "We have been looking, watching, waiting for signs that more of our kind would be born, that this loneliness we have lived with for so long would be ended. We also labored to share our immortality-- to find the secret to our endless youth, to share with the rest of ponykind. Again, to no avail."

"It was only in this last century that I started seeing signs that our solitude was ending... in a way we hadn't quite expected."

"What were the signs?" Twilight asked.

Celestia grinned. "I think you can figure out the first one," she chuckled. "It's how you got your babysitter after all..."

Twilight brightened. "Princess Cadence! You saw her ascend?"

"I saw her born," Celestia said. "Quite the surprise for us. She was born a normal Pegasus--- for all of five minutes. Then she ascended. (2) Luna and I were born alicorns... we had no idea before Cadence that normal ponies could become alicorns."

"I had been watching," Celestia pointed out. "For signs of other alicorns, anywhere in the world." She waved her horn and an enormous map of Equestria and the surrounding lands appeared in midair. "I only saw a few possibles, over all those centuries," she said. The map sprouted three or four bright red dots, scattered over its wide surface. "Massive magical surges, strange disturbances in the Aether.... I had thought them false leads. But after Cadence's birth, I had to reassess my data. Where once I had seen a few possible sparks... there were now quite a few more." Dozens of dots suddenly speckled the map. "But to my frustration, my duties as Princess-- and the imminent return of... of Luna--" she looked askance at Luna, who flushed awkwardly. "Meant that I could only investigate one or two." She gave Twilight a wry grin. "Then I got a student and my hooves were really full." Now it was Twilight's turn to blush.

"Then the next, no-doubts-about-it sign happened," Celestia said. "Six ordinary ponies found the Elements of Harmony. Or should I say six extraordinary ponies... ones who, had I been more
observant, would have been obvious candidates for possible ascension."

"Us?" Fluttershy squeaked.

"Of course. Remember what I told you? Do you really imagine that anything but a pony of extraordinary potential could perform a sonic rainboom while still a school filly?" she looked at Dash, who was still looking a little freaked out about the horn growing out of her own head. "Or detect a vein of gemstones from miles away?" Here she looked at Rarity, who blushed and fluttered her wings. "Or communicate with animals as naturally as breathing--- when she had never seen a wild animal before in her life?" Fluttershy 'eeped' and smiled.

"And let us not downplay the more subtle gifts among us," Celestia continued. "I have watched Sweet Apple Acres for some time now, and it is by far the most bountiful orchard in that region. But to have the gift to raise magic-infused apples from the Everfree--!"

Applejack flushed. "Twern't me that did that," she said. "That was all Granny Smith and Great Grandpa."

"And yet you made them _thrive_," Celestia pressed. "With only yourself, your brother, and your little sister to tend the whole farm. And let us not forget your ability to see through lies."

Pinkie cocked her head. "How are those two things related anyways?"

It was Luna who chuckled. "When you till the earth, you must learn to cherish the truth, to accept it no matter how comforting a lie might be. You learn that no amount of falsehood or self-deception will change the way the plants grow, or the waters flow, or the stones rest. What is, is, and you must accept the truth of it, if you would prosper."

"Heh. 'Apples is Apples,' is how Grandpa allus put it," Applejack reminisced.

Celestia turned her attention to Pinkie Pie. "And don't think my sister and I haven't noticed your unusual gifts, Pinkie," she teased.

"What, you mean my Pinkie Sense?" Pinkie said cheerfully. And strangely disingenuously.

"Just for starters," Celestia admitted, cocking an eyebrow. "And no, trying to distract everypony is not going to work this time. We're well aware of how things seem to.... _bend_ around you, to your favor."

Pinkie Pie suddenly looked unsettled. "Gee, I really dunno what you're talking about, then--" She looked around, almost as if she expected something to happen.

"Pinkie," Celestia chided gently. "That won't work this time, I told you."

To the other ponies' surprise, Pinkie seemed to shrink in further on herself. Her eyes widened into teary pools. "But I can't," she said cryptically. "It's bad if I tell..."

To her friends' mystification, Celestia stepped down off the dais and threw her wing around the cringing former earth pony. "It's okay now, Pinkie," she said kindly. "I'm sorry I didn't see it sooner; I should have been there, and intervened, taken you under my wing..."

"Princess? Wha....?" Twilight looked around at her friends. They looked as puzzled as her.

Luna stepped down off the dais and joined her sister in nuzzling the inexplicably distraught pink pony. "Pinkie is a Bender," the night princess said.
"A what?" Applejack said, her brows furrowed.

"A Bender. Or a Warper, is another term for it," Celestia said. "It's a rare variation of earth pony talents. A Bender can bend things. Time, space, even probability--chance and luck--"

Twilight gasped and leapt to her hooves. "Of course! That's how she keeps popping out of places she couldn't have possibly got into! That's how I saw her in the mirror that one time! That's how she could win a dozen games of tic tac toe in a row! That's how her Pinkie Sense works-- And that's probably why I kept getting beaned with falling flowerpots whenever I tried to investigate it," she said, rubbing her head ruefully. "AHA!" She pointed at Pinkie Pie and did a victory jig. "I knew there was a rational explanation, I knew it all along! I knew it I knew it I... knew... aherm. Right." She sheepishly stopped dancing as the others stared at her. "Sorry?"

Celestia gave a wry grin and continued. "Anyway, Pinkie was obviously a Bender from a very early age. Had I paid more attention in the times we met I would have seen it. And I would have done something to help her..." She looked at Pinkie.

Twilight gasped again. "The Ill-Starred!" The others looked at her. "That's... what ponies used to call ponies who they thought brought bad luck," Twilight explained. She looked at Pinkie, comprehension dawning. "And I bet most of them were Benders, weren't they."

"Insightful as always, Twilight," Celestia said, nodding. "Most Benders can sense when things are going to happen. Some can just barely tweak the cosmic fabric, and make things happen, sending good or ill luck other ponies' way. Especially if they're worried or upset or defensive. And if they don't know what they're doing, it's hard to control."

"I didn't mean for you to get hit on the noggin, Twilight," Pinkie whimpered. "I just wished so hard for you to get tired of investigating me..."

"That it suddenly rained flowerpots on my head," Twilight said wryly.

"Pinkie was prodigiously gifted. I'm guessing that her family saw her... unusual proclivities.... and warned her to never let anypony know she was... Ill-starred." Celestia said the word with obvious distaste.

"Pa and Ma always said it was a bad thing," Pinkie sniffled. "That bad things would happen if anypony knew." She shook her head. "But ponies started to figure it out... At least in Ponyville I could start over--"

"You mean Pinkie had to leave her family 'cause the neighbors thought she was jinxed?" Applejack said, dismayed. "Aw, sugarcube..."

"I wish I had figured it out sooner," Celestia lamented. "I would have done something to help her. But I'm doing it now. Pinkamena Diane Pie, listen to me." Pinkie looked up at her through her waterfall of a mane. "You don't have to hide your gifts anymore. Understand? Your parents were just trying to protect you from ponies who would fear or resent you. But that's over now. You're a very special, very gifted pony, and you should never be ashamed of that."

"Even if I'm Ill-Starred?"

"You are not ill starred," Celestia said. "You're a Luck-Maker." She surprised the pink pony with a kiss on the forehead. "And don't you forget it."

"Does this mean I'm your new Faithful Student?" Pinkie asked suddenly, brightening a little.
Celestia chuckled. "Well, I think you'll be more our Faithful Student, Pinkie," she said. "You will need a bit of training to work out the kinks in your abilities. I can help a bit, but Luna has more of a knack with luck, time and space magic."

"And the rest of us will be right there for you too," Twilight said firmly. "Right girls?" There was an overwhelming consensus to the affirmative.

Rarity dabbed at her eyes with a hanky. "Oh my, tissue time," she said. "This is all very heartwarming-- and enlightening, too-- but you were saying about other alicorns, your Highness?"

"Just Celestia, from now on, Rarity," Celestia said. "You're all alicorn princesses now, and we are family-- not ruler and subject. But my, yes, I have drifted off the topic." She waved her horn. the hovering map rolled up, shrunk, and multiplied into six copies. "You know of my plans for Equestria," she said. "To someday end the scourge of mortality upon our little ponies."

"It is not good that some few should be blessed with endless youth, while so many of our subjects wither like flowers cut from the vine," Luna said somberly. "Long have we sought to share our gift of longevity and youth with others."

"But to do that, we need more alicorns," Celestia said. "We few are not enough to crack this puzzle on our own... or at least not within many lifetimes. And none here is willing to wait for that, I think."

The bearers all let their thoughts drift to friends and loved ones, some more saddle-weary with age than others... and more than one thrilled to the idea of them being young, healthy and strong again. "We need more alicorns. Their magic, their insight..."

"Their bloodlines?" Rarity suggested.

"Ahem. Indeed. It would be good to have more alicorn lineage in the gene pool, yes," Celestia admitted. "To this end, as new alicorns of the realm, I would commission the six of you to go forth and seek out these possible ascendants." She levitated a copy of the map to each of them. "It will be some weeks before your quest will begin, and there will be much to arrange after the coronations. But I would urge you to be..." she paused. "Not necessarily secretive. But please be very, very discreet in to whom you disclose your mission. Not all would have good intentions towards our cause-- or to the nascent alicorns who may be out there, unknowing." Several of them gulped, but they all nodded.

"I think I'm missing something," Rainbow Dash said. "Why didn't you send out other ponies to try and track these nasty alicorns..."

"Nascent, Dash," Twilight corrected.

"Whatever. Why didn't you just send somepony else to look? Why does it have to be us?"

Celestia shook her head. "As foals, my sister and I learned many things about our nature. If an alicorn doesn't wish to be found, they won't be found," she said. "Save by another alicorn."

"It made for most frustrating games of hide and seek," Luna reminisced.

"In fact, it is our affinity that will hasten the work; nothing can seek out an alicorn as readily as another alicorn."

Luna suddenly cleared her throat. Loudly. Several times. Celestia sighed. "Yes, Luna, I'll tell them," she said. "Girls, I believe Luna would like you to exercise certain preferences in which potentials you seek out first..."
"Um, certain preferences?" Twilight asked.

"I'll give you a hint," Luna said, deadpan. "How many alicorns do you now know?"

"Well, uh, all of us and Cadence, I guess," Dash said.

Luna's eyebrows could have served as a level. "Notice anything missing from our happy little herd?"

"Uhhhh..."

"Stallions," Celestia said, rolling her eyes. "She's saying she wants you to keep an especial eye out for any nascent alicorn stallions."

There was something of a raw, awkward pause. "Um, not to get too personal," Twilight said. "But... couldn't you um, date a regular--"

"I did once," Luna said tragically. No further words need said.

Twilight of course said them. "How long ago--"

"Five hundred years before my fall as Nightmare Moon," Luna said. "Do not mistake me, Twilight Sparkle; I loved Blue Yonder more than anything. But he was gone... so quickly." She looked heartbroken. "Would you not do the same? How could I possibly fall in love again, with somepony who would be gone like a breeze through my mane? I swore then I would hold my heart only for a lover who could be with me for the ages."

There was a chorus of 'awwww's. "That's so sad--" Twilight said.

Luna leaned forward till her nose was an inch from Twilight's. "And on a related note. It's been fifteen hundred years, Twilight. Fifteen hundred bucking years since the last time. You get where I'm going with this?"

"The last time since wha oh dear, um...." Rarity blushed.

"Wowch," Rainbow Dash muttered.

Luna nodded. "Exactly." Her eyes got a little round. "I'm starting to get... just... a little.. TENSE."

Twilight leaned back from the lunar princess. "Rrrright. We'll keep that in mind, then--"

"We'd better," Rainbow Dash said, her own eyes a little round. "I don't wanna go a thousand years without, y'know, intimate male companionship either."

"Oh my," Fluttershy said, alarmed. She cast a sidelong look at Celestia. "Um, Prin-- um, Celestia, don't you--?"

Celestia sighed and tossed her mane. "Of course," she said. "I'm just better at controlling it." Luna stuck her tongue out at her. "Mind you, there are summers when some of the royal Guard start looking mighty damn good--" There was a crash just outside the doors; the distinct sound of a soldier dropping his weapon and possibly his helmet. Celestia just smirked.

"But alas, I can't quite bring myself to be a cradle robber," she finished in a low whisper to Fluttershy. "What the hell. I guess it wouldn't hurt keeping an eye out for someone tall, dark and alicornish for me, too...."

Fluttershy blushed and giggled fiercely.
Celestia stood up straight, spreading out her wings. "Thus is your mission, from ourselves to thee; to go forth across the land, seek out our alicorn brethren and sisters and bring them safe to Canterlot; to set the foundations of the alicorn race; that we might bring the blessings of alicorn longevity to all the clans of ponydom."

The bearers of the elements of Harmony all knelt. Applejack’s head suddenly jerked back up.

"Hold yer horses," she said. "Did she say something about us being princesses?"

1) 3/4 of a tizzy. Just shy of a rumpus and a fair margin from a full blown furor.

2) It was quite the event. Screaming, panic, shouting, flailing hooves-- and that was just the expectant father. In the first month, within a five block radius of Cadence’s nursery, there were fifteen marriage proposals, five weddings, seven second honeymoons, and every single schoolcolt spontaneously decided that girls didn’t have cooties after all.
Six coronations. Six. Six new alicorn princesses, all appearing in a single night, who would now each have their own staff, their own servants, their own royal quarters, their own royal powers and, let's not forget, their own coronations. The consternation this caused amongst the royalty, the Houses of the Equestrian Parliament, the Guard and the Castle staff was commensurate.

In other words, everypony freaked.

Orders and paperwork flew, ponies galloped hither and thither, platoons were mobilized and immediately fell into disarray as they stumbled over each other, grown stallions screamed in hysterics like fillies, and at least one klaxon was going off somewhere in the hallways of the castle. (1) It was the fourth worst state of chaos Canterlot palace had ever been in. (2)

It was a pell-mell riot in the great rotunda when Celestia teleported in. She stood in the middle of the great open room, spread her wings, and used the Royal Canterlot Voice.

"ENOUGH."

Ponies basically screeched to a halt all over the rotunda. There was dead silence; all that could be heard was the faint sound of the klaxon blaring somewhere in the labyrinthine depths of the castle. "Thank you," the Princess said, keeping her voice loud enough to be heard by everypony there.

"My Little Ponies, calm yourselves. The ascendency is not a crisis! It is a proud and glorious day for Equestria. There is no reason for anypony to succumb to panic--"

She was interrupted by the sound of oddly muffled galloping hooves. Out of one of the many hallways branching off the rotunda came Princess Luna, still wearing her pajamas and bunny slippers, running as if Tirek himself were on hot on her heels. "The snails! The snails are finally here!" She shrieked, standing in the middle of the roomful of frozen ponies and spinning in a circle. "Raise the drawbridge! Lower the portcullis! Man the battlements! Fetch the Morton's Salt! It is the end, the sticky sticky end!!" She turned and bolted off down another hall, her bunny-muffled hooves fading in the distance.

"--No rational reason for anypony to succumb to panic," Celestia amended. "If we all keep level heads and work together and, most importantly, exercise some horse sense, everything will be fine."

"Now, what seems to be the problem?" she asked with just a tad of excessive cheer. Naturally everypony started clamoring again, this time gathering around her to do it. This time around she used a thunderclap to call for silence. "You first," she said, rolling her eyes and pointing at a random pony with a hoof.

"Your majesty," the bespectacled pony in question said. "Parliament is in a tizzy over the sudden appearance of six-- six!-- new Princesses, they're wanting to know what this does to the Diarchy--"

"Nothing more than what Princess Cadence's birth did," Celestia said. "The title of Princess was given to Mi Amore Cadenza as an honorific with certain minimal privileges and authority; they just need to run off six copies of the same decrees issued back then. It was only twenty five years ago; honestly, tell them to look it up! All right, now YOU," she said, pointing to a man-at-arms.
"Your Highness, the royal Guard is grossly understaffed for six Princesses," he said severely. "We need--"

"More soldiers? Congratulate all the recruits in basic training, they're Guards now," Celestia deadpanned. "Fit them for their gilded armor-- spray paint the training armor if we don't have enough yet-- and divide them up between the six."

The guard's jaw dropped in horror. "But... Your Highness... they're raw recruits! Worse than raw recruits! They..."

"Welcome to the world of on-the-job training," Celestia said. "Mix them in, Captain. Put at least one of the experienced guardsponies with two or three of the new. Give the experienced guardsponies responsibility over the rookies and put them through their paces. Lighten up on the spit and polish for a while; I'd rather have them a little disorderly looking than understaffed... and with what the new princesses are going to be up to, they'll need ready and willing hooves to help them more than they need shiny armor and stiff poses. YOU."

The mare almost jumped out of her hooves but rallied. "Your majesty, we're having some difficulty planning out six coronations in such short--"

Celestia facehooved at that. "Combine them into one big coronation, you silly thing," she said. "Main throneroom, decorations themed on the Elements, everything else more or less the same. --- Oh, and burn that damned coronation chariot. It's as ugly as sin. It looks like a, a cheap toy designed for a mentally handicapped child. Come to think of it, burn those dresses we wore at Cadence's coronation. Maroon and gold? What in the Maker's name were the dressmakers thinking? In fact... give the job to Princess Rarity."

The mare's quill stopped in mid-scribble. "Princess Rarity? Really?"

"She was a dressmaker par excellence before she was ever an alicorn," Celestia said. "Tell her white with gold trim for me, midnight blue and silver for Lulu, and lavender and pink for Cadence. Simple white with gold filigree for all the new Princesses... they'll be wearing the Elements for jewelry. " the mare nodded as she scratched down the instructions. "Very good. And you?"

"It was the majordomo. "Your majesty, the staff of personal servants---"

"Hire more. Next?"

This pony was a tweedy looking fellow with a ledger in one hoof. " Bean Counter, Royal treasury, your Highness. What with the royal allowance, new accommodations to be constructed for their new Majesties, staffing, necessary expansion of the--"

"The chase, my dear Counter. Cut to it."

The pony slipped into a rather Southern patois. "How we gon' pay for all dis?" he drawled, raising an eyebrow. He was quite obviously picturing six new princesses driving Equestria into bankruptcy.

Celestia sighed and rolled her eyes. "Congratulations, you're the new keeper of Emergency vault number Thirteen(3)," she said. With a flick of her horn she manifested a rather large, ornate skeleton key hanging from a chain. "Have the set of royal jewelry in there auctioned off. That should cover the immediate expenses, and use whatever is left over to start a trust fund for each of them."

"Y'all gon' trus' me t' invest awl dat?" Bean Counter stammered as the key settled around his neck. His accent got thicker the more alarmed he was, Celestia noted.
"You're on my financial staff. I trust you," Celestia said. "The Princesses will be rather busy abroad for... the foreseeable future; I want a suitably regal lifestyle waiting for them when they return." Bean Counter nodded; he knew precisely what she meant... or at the least he was certain he knew what she meant, which was what Celestia was counting on.

A few more rounds of one-on-one instructions and soon the rotunda was... well, still chaotic, but at least it was no longer bedlam. The panicked rushing about had some purpose to it. Celestia sighed and wiped her brow with one hoof. "Good, things are back on track. Now if somepony would please turn off that damn klaxon?"

1) It was the alert klaxon marked "in event of invasion by giant snails." Commissioned by Princess Luna at the age of six, after reading one rip-snorter of a monster story right before bedtime.

2) Preceded, in ascending order, the return of Nightmare Moon, Discord's escape, and the time the Gryphon ambassador's wife had been overheard saying that Princess Celestia had a fat ass.

3) There were quite a number of those "emergency vaults" scattered about the castle, remnants from a time when she and Luna had been rather busy kicking the snot out of uppity dragons. After getting whomped crosseyed by a pretty pony princess, most dragons were more than eager to pay a tithe of dane-geld just to keep the story from getting around.

4) Celestia prided herself on the fact that it was her own money, not any tax revenue, that funded her lavish lifestyle. A job in her royal treasury was more than just counting stacks of coins like Scrooge McDuck.

5) Long ago Celestia and Luna had realized that if they didn't live in a lifestyle that the average pony regarded as appropriately lavish for the Princesses of the Moon and Sun, their little ponies would actually spend ruinous amounts of their own money to give them one. Celestia found it simpler and more compassionate to give them her own money and let them purchase the lifestyle they thought she and Luna should have. It was rather like a doting mother giving her child money to buy her a mother's day gift, but it all worked out.
Chapter 4

The new Princesses were all currently roomed in the East Tower together, in quarters normally reserved for diplomats and visiting royalty from other kingdoms. The suites were capacious--- the smallest one could have held the entirety of the Carousel Boutique with room to spare-- and lavishly appointed. The opulent surroundings were doing little to set them at ease, however. The shock of their metamorphosis had passed, anxiety settling in its place. Now they'd had time to sit down and think about it all, the stress was making them more erratic by the moment. In the course of twenty four hours their lives, their knowledge of how their world worked, even their own bodies had been turned topsy turvy. Every aspect of change had brought with it a hundred questions they wanted to ask, and no answers were forthcoming.

In short, the mane six were starting to freak.(1)

The six of them had gathered-- or perhaps huddled-- in Twilight Sparkle's suite. They had dismissed the servants and were now scattered around the bedroom, fretting and plexing in the manner best suited to them. Twilight had taken to pacing around the room, muttering to herself. Rainbow Dash had become increasingly fidgety, flying from perch to perch and alternating between looking at herself in the many mirrors around the room as if searching for some blemish and staring cross-eyed at the tip of her own horn. Rarity and Applejack were commiserating together over the boutique and the farm. Fluttershy hadn't quit saying "oh dear oh dear oh dear" for the past half hour. Even Pinkie Pie was looking as nervous as a schoolfilly sitting outside the principal's office.(2)

The door to the suite opened and Princess Luna stepped in. Her mane was slightly rumpled and there were bags under her eyes. There was also, inexplicably, a bunny slipper on her back left hoof. She noticed it and kicked it off with a hint of annoyance. "Good day, my little ponies," she said. Her mouth quirked up into a smile. "No, that isn't correct, anymore, is it? I should say good day, my new kin." She seemed to take great pleasure in saying it. "We are sorry we left you here alone for so many hours, but--" she paused and yawned. "Forgive me... but there were many affairs of state to take care of due to this." Plus, I'd been up for almost twenty four hours and I was dead on my hooves, she thought to herself. Not that four hours of napping helped much. Darned snail klaxon false alarm... "We--- Celestia and I--- are sure you have many questions..."(3)

That opened the floodgates. They gathered around the Lunar princess like a flock of frantic ducklings, talking over top of each other. "CEASE!!!" Luna finally bellowed. The floor itself vibrated with the force of her voice. They all leapt backward a step, clamming up instantly. There was a faint "eep" from somepony, then all was still. "Aherm. Sorry," Luna said. "Perhaps I should begin by answering some of thy most likely questions in advance?

"Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, Twilight Sparkle: We have made arrangements for temporary replacements to fill thy positions of duty in Ponyville; librarian, veterinarian, and lead weather specialist. Thou wilt be interviewing candidates for a more permanent replacement at thy convenience; we shall only send hence those that meet thy expectations.

"Though, ahem, there is little rush to select a new librarian till a new library is built and stocked.

"Servants have been sent to ship thy belongings to the Palace, and to escort thy pets hither as well. With the exception of Rainbow Dash; moving pegasi will simply be towing thy cloud home hither.
Fluttershy, fear not, there is more than plentiful room in the royal gardens for thy menagerie." The three mares in question sighed in relief.

"Fair Rarity, thy business is still thine own, but we would kindly suggest henceforth that thou sellest thy fashions through a proxy, under another name... lest thou be accused of using thy royalty to undue advantage." Luna held up a hoof, forestalling any objections. "Tis a bitter pill to swallow, we know; but wouldst thou be happy wondering if thy success was falsely earned?" Rarity frowned thoughtfully, but made no disagreement.

"Good Applejack..." here the moon princess paused. "I know thou hast strong ties with thy kin and thy land, and thy heart must ache at royal duty calling thee away from them. But it is not for all time; thou wilt be able to go hence to them at thy leisure, when all is settled. And when thou canst not be with them, as a princess thou wilt be able to send both money and strong backs to help shoulder the work. Thou hast not abandoned them; thou hast moved to a place where you can aid them from afar." Applejack's eyes were wet, but she nodded.

"And yes, there wilt be a coronation," Luna finished. "You wear a fancy dress, walk up the aisle, since there are six of thee, thou shalt all walk the aisle together, mine sister doth blah-de-blah, We present to thee Princess blah blah de blah, then she giveth thee a tiara, you ride the carriage, wave nicely at the ponies, the end. It is naught to perspire." Luna dismissed the whole thing with a roll of her eyes and a wave of her hoof. "We have already informed thy families; they shall arrive at the palace oer the next two or three days, and shall be staying in the guest suites for the coronation and the celebrations afterwards."

Pinkie perked up at that. "You mean there'll be a party?"

Luna smirked. "One or two," she said. "And I give our royal word that only one or two of them will be like the Grand Galloping Gala." There were awkward grins all around at that. "Does that cover all thy questions?" The girls mumbled amongst themselves, but nodded. "Truly? Art thou all certain?"

Again, the new princesses all looked at one another, then at Luna, and nodded. "Splendid. If any of thee needest me, I shall be in the spare room across the hall." She yawned immensely. "Sleeping. I bid thee good morrow." She left.

She went straight to her room and crawled into the immense four-poster bed that was waiting for her. She would have gone back to her own chambers, normally, but she had a fair notion of how things were about to go. "I give it an hour at most," she muttered to herself as she flopped onto the oversized mattress and fell asleep.

She was wrong. It was an hour and a half.

There was a creak and a sliver of light as somepony crept quietly into the darkened room. Luna sighed, but lay still. She had awoken the instant the door had opened, but let the intruder tip-hoof her way to the canopy bed. The bedcurtains parted. "Princess? Hey, Princess Luna!" a raspy voice whispered. An azure hoof poked her in the side. "Princess, are you awake?"

Luna let her eye crack open at that one. "Forsmoth, and how would I answer in the negative?" she said.

It was Rainbow Dash, of course. Luna was surprised; she hardly expected the skyjockey to be the first. The stunt flyer was looking at her in puzzlement, obviously befuddled by the question. "Never mind," Luna groaned, sitting up. "What troubles thee, Princess Rainbow?"

The pegasus didn't meet her eye. She stood there, awkwardly rubbing one forehoof on the back of the other. "It's... kinda personal," she said.
"Personal?" Luna said. "How personal?"

"Personal personal." The pegasus' eyes were filled with vulnerability.

The weary moon princess smiled a bit. At that moment Dash reminded her so much of the countless colts and fillies she saw on her nightly dream-rounds, haunted by one childish fear or another. She patted the bed with her hoof. "Hop on up," she said. "We shall have us... what is the term? Some small girl-talk." The nervous pegasus looked over her shoulder then hopped in. Once the draperies had closed around them, Luna reclined casually and looked at her. "So... what is this 'personal' issue?" She said.

Dash looked down at her own fidgeting forehooves for several seconds. Just as Luna was about to repeat the question, the pegasus blurted out, "How tall am I gonna get?"

Luna raised an eyebrow. "Prithee?"

Dash fidgeted some more with her forehooves as she lay there. "I don't wanna sound like a dork or nuthin'," she said. "But I-- I can't stop worrying about it. How tall am I gonna be? How big am I gonna get? Am I gonna be as tall as you? As Celestia? Is my mane and tail gonna start doing that, that wavy thing yours and Celestia's do? I mean, I'm already pretty spazzed out 'cause a this," here she tapped her own horn with a hoof. "How else is my body gonna change? I mean, you guys all make being all lanky and stuff look good, but long legs aren't really good for stunt flying and I'll never fit in a Wonderbolt's uniform like that--"

Luna chuckled to herself. It should have dawned on her that of all of them, someone as body-proud as the pegasus athlete would be alarmed at the changes in her body. "Calm thyself," she said, resting a kind hoof on Dash's own. "The 'lankiness' thou referrest to is the product of many centuries. Thou'lt be much as thou art for many ages hence."

"Are you sure?" Dash asked.

Luna nodded, smiling somewhat wryly. "Believeth me. I am barely my sister's junior, yet I am still laboring to catch up with her in growth." She chuckled. "And besides, if thy form does cause thee undue consternation---" a pale blue glow surrounded her horn and spread down over her body. When it faded, in her place lay an alicorn no taller or longer of limb than Rainbow Dash. "Thou hast other options," she concluded.

"Whoa!" Dash blinked, wings fluttering in surprise. "We can do that?"

"With practice," Luna said. She cast the spell again and slipped effortlessly back to her original form.

"Wait a minute," Dash said suddenly. "That was your real form?" Luna just smiled. "It was." Luna kept smiling. "It wasn't. ....You're not gonna tell me, are you." Dash's eyebrows drew down. "So not fair."

Luna chuckled. Let her wonder. "Does it matter?"

"Guess not." Rainbow Dash blushed. "I'm sorry to freak out on you like this..." She looked worried again. "Are there... any other um, changes I should be expecting? There are, um, rumors that I've heard from time to time. And, um."

"Rumors?" Luna arched an eyebrow.

Rainbow Dash rolled her eyes, face flaming. "It's a stupid rumor. And-- what you said about stallions made me figure it was garbage, but--" she looked around as if searching for eavesdroppers and
leaned in. "Okay, there are these guys on the weather patrol, see, and they told me once they'd heard... that the reason there aren't any alicorn stallions around is that, um, that all alicorns have-- have both-- " she sat up on her haunches and made several very bizarre and possibly arcane gestures with her hooves.

Luna's eyes bugged out. She stared at Dash in slack-jawed disbelief. "What?"

"'Cause alicorns are s'posed to be all the pony races in one, earthpony and pegasus and unicorn, right, and so they're also s'posed to be both female and--"

Luna gawped at her in horror. "What in Equestria??" She gagged. "Never in my--where in Equestria did they-- what is WRONG with ponies??"

"So I'm taking that as a no," the pegasus said neutrally.

"Absolutely no," Luna said scathingly. No wonder the polychromatic pegasus had been so rattled by her own metamorphosis, if that was the sort of scuttlebutt among the masses. "Pray tell, what other anatomical horrors doth the modern witling bestow upon us?"

Dash looked defensive. "Hay, it's not like anypony could walk up and ask--"

"No, no, forgive us," Luna sighed, her hoof to her forehead. She giggled suddenly. "The things ponies believe..."

"Tell me about it," Dash muttered. "You should hear some of the things ponies say about pegasi." She fanned her wings and looked at them. "I mean jeez, if my wings really did that, I wouldn't even be able to walk straight, much less fly."

It took a second for Luna to get the reference. She laughed. "Ahh, yon legend of the wing-boner," she snorted. "Be not too proud though; I am sure the tales the pegasi tell about earth ponies and unicorns are a fair match for it in silliness." I really should speak to sister about improving the quality of the health classes in our schools, she thought.

"Yeah," Dash agreed, tapping her horn. "Now that I've got one, I can't believe anypony ever thought that this thing was supposed to be--- well, you know. 'Sensitive,' " she made quote-marks in the air with her hooves.

"Well, thou knowest how some ponies think," Luna sighed. "If tis longer than tis wide, it must be a 'you know what.' " She smirked. "And if tis wider than tis long, tis a 'you-know-what' turned sideways." The two mares sniggered and snorted.

"I get the feeling I'm going to learn way more about pony biology than I ever wanted," Dash said, rolling her eyes.

Luna chuckled. "Fear not, Rainbow Dash," she said kindly. "Be they earth pony or unicorn or pegasus, ponies are far more alike than different. Thy body and mind will remain... fairly the same as always."

"Thanks Princess," Rainbow Dash said. She got to her hooves and hopped off the bed. "I'll let you catch up on your sleep." She trotted to the door. She looked back over her shoulder. "You know? You're pretty cool, Princess." She walked out the door, closing it behind her.

Luna lay back down, snuggling up with the pillows. I wonder what "they" say about the earth ponies? was the last thought that crossed her mind as she drifted off to sleep.
"Princess Luna? Your highness? Are you awake?"

Luna groaned and rolled over. "Why do they always ask that?" she muttered. *That was, what, thirty more minutes? Forty five?* She found herself almost nose to nose with Princess Rarity. The white unicorn-- former unicorn, current alicorn, Luna reminded herself-- backed up a step, but no further. Her horn was glowing with a candlelight spell; her face was a portrait of distress. "What ails thee, Princess Rarity?" Luna asked.

Rarity sat down on the floor, her head hanging. "Princess Luna--- I-- I can't do this."

"Do what?" Luna asked.

"This!" She waved a hoof at herself. "Being a Princess. Being royalty. Royalty! I..." She shook her head. "It's not for the likes of me."

Luna sat up and regarded the fashionista. "And why not?" she said simply.

Rarity sighed. "Princess, I--" she stopped as Luna pressed a hoof over her mouth.

"Just Luna," the moon princess said. "We are sisters now."

"Luna." Rarity bit her lip. "You know of my ambitions. To be a great fashion designer, to move up in the world, to join the elite upper circles of Canterlot society."

"And move up you have," Luna pointed out. "Thou art a princess now, of Canterlot. Thou hast reached and surpassed those circles."

Rarity shook her head, smiling sadly. "Though not through my own efforts or virtue," she said. "I've been... jumped up to this place by a sheer magical accident." She flushed and bit her lip again. "And I've scarcely acted in a way worthy of a noble title.

"You'll recall some months ago I stayed as a guest of the palace, thanks to Twilight and Prin-- thanks to Twilight and Celestia? Roundabout Twilight's birthday? While I was here I found myself moving in the social upper circles here in Canterlot." She hung her head. "You know how I managed to fit in with all those rich and powerful ponies? By lying through my teeth. Pretending I wasn't from Ponyville, lying about my 'elite friends'--- Of course it all blew up in my face when Twilight's birthday party spilled over into the soiree I was at right next door. Fancy Pants was gracious enough to brush it off, and proclaim himself charmed by my Ponyville friends. But... I'm not so foolish as to think that Canterlot society has forgotten. Or forgiven."


Rarity realized who it was she was speaking to. "Forgive me," she said, ears flicking back contritely. "I had forgotten about your own difficulties since your return." She stood up and paced in a circle. "But it's more than that. I fear my own shallowness just proves that I don't deserve this--"

She started at Luna's bark of laughter. "Art we speaking of the same upper crust?" She mocked. "Dost thou know how few of those popinjays deserves their station in life? The sweeping majority are there by accident of birth, inheriting their wealth and their titles, the last noble accomplishment in their lineage centuries in the past. Those like good Sir Fancy Pants are rare, rare indeed. Thou
thinkest thy own dissemblings shallow? There are nobles and courtesans-- some our own blood kin-- who are shallow as the sheen of water on a glass plate. Worse, they are vicious and petty, obsequious to their betters, condescending to their equals and hurtful to their lessers.

"Who among them hath faced dragons and manticores and changelings for our kingdom? Who among them could bear one of the Elements? Who among them helped redeem... me... from a place of terrible darkness? Thou art more than worthy of thy ascendancy, dear Rarity, much less thy title."

She reached out and put her hoof on Rarity's shoulder. "That is why we need more like thy friends... and thee."

"Why?" Rarity said plaintively.

"Because there are many in our court who could use a friend like thee, Rarity," Luna said. "From servants and staff to new nobles-- lords, ladies, dukes and duchesses--- lifted to their new station by my sister and myself, young and innocent and naive, desperately trying to make their place--- whom the more spiteful among the politicians and the nobles and the old money would pluck like vultures at a hapless lamb. They could use a patron, someone who could take them under her wing; someone who..."

"Someone who had been where they are now?" Rarity smiled at the thought. Princess Rarity, patron of the nouveau riche...that would be rather grand... "Perhaps I could... find a niche, after all."

"Indeed." Luna scowled. "There are too many who are scorned for their humble beginnings. And too many who could heartily stand being taken down a peg or two." A certain blonde unicorn fop crossed her mind. "Mincing, preening blonde twit," she muttered aloud.

"Dare I guess who this particular blue-blooded twit is?" Rarity said dryly.

"Ah, that's right," Luna said. "The Grand Galloping Gala. Prince Blueblood was thy escort for the evening... Twilight Sparkle did fill me in on the gruesome details." She grimaced. "My condolences." The grimace turned into a smirk. "By the by; Thou knowest that the coronation will be followed by at least one royal banquet." Rarity nodded, not sure where this was going. "All the nobility will be in attendance... twould be such a shame were thou not there... in thy new royal gown, of thy own design... freshly coronated.... and it would be such terrible bad manners to not re-make his acquaintance--- in front of all his friends and sycophants..." the smirk grew absolutely malevolent.

Rarity pictured it in her mind. Her expression of glee was priceless. "Oh, that is absolutely wicked!" she whispered. "Princess Luna, you are AWFUL!" her eyes sparkled.

Luna gave Rarity a sly look. "Well, what's the point of being the bad little princess if thou cannot enjoy it once in a while?" she said.

Rarity's cackle was anything but ladylike.

Luna didn't even bother pretending to sleep the fourth time. "Enter," she said, magicking the door open. On the other side stood Applejack, her hoof still raised to knock on the door. The farmpony gave her a sheepish grin. "H'lo, Princess," she said.

"Just Luna, please," Luna said. "Something troubles thee." It was a statement, not a question.
Applejack stepped into the room, doffing her hat. "Ayehp," she said. "This Great Master Plan thing of your'n and Celestia's."

Luna was surprised. Well, this one is far more straight to the point than the others, she thought. "Oh?" she replied. "How interesting. I would have thought Twilight Sparkle to be the one to first voice any concerns."

"Oh, she's voicing 'em, all right," Applejack said. "'S all she's been talkin' about all day. All sorts of egg-heady stuff about population density this and longevity that an' socio-polly whatever. I think she's savin' it all up for Celestia, though. But... a lot of what she's been ramblin' about got me to thinkin' too."

"Prithee, unburden thyself," Luna said, waving a hoof at the bed next to her. Applejack awkwardly accepted the invitation, climbing up on the bed and sitting next to the lunar diarch. "So what hast thou been thinking?"

Applejack lay her hat on the bed before her. "As I understand it, this quest thing you're sending us out on-- it's not just to find other alicorns, just 'cause you want to find more alicorns," she said. "You're wantin' to bring all the alicorns together for their magic. So you can study it... and figure out how to...to make everypony immortal." She rattled her head briefly. "Sakes, that's world-shaking just to say."

"More or less, thou hast the gist of it," Luna asserted.

Applejack looked at her, her brow furrowed. "And, I mean, I don't wanna sound like a know-it-all, an' y'all are thousands and thousands o' years older than us, and have probably forgotten more than all of us combined will ever know, but---"

"Are y'all sure this is right?"

Luna took a long, patient breath. "And why dost thou not think it right?" She asked.

"Cause death is a part o' life," Applejack said brusquely. "Don't get me wrong; I would love more'n anything to... to wave this horn," she tapped the tip for emphasis "an' make Granny young and healthy again. Just for starters. But ain't that just me bein' selfish? Wantin' her to keep on living, to heck with the consequences, cause I don't wanna let her go? 'She's waited a long time to cross over to the Great Fields on the other side, an' be with Granpa an' all her loved ones again. Would she thank me for making it so she had to wait so much longer... maybe even forever?"

"An'... an' messin' with life, an' death. Like what Twilight's been fretting about. What happens when we run out of room for everyone? Or we unbalance the circle of life or somethin'. What could we all be throwing out of whack?"

"Ponies livin' forever-- it ain't natural--- whut, whut's so funny?" For Luna had begun to chuckle at the word 'natural.'

"What's funny?" Luna repeated. "Oh, naught but that a pony who lives in a world where the Sun and the Moon are controlled, and the weather itself is sculpted by hoof, should fret that something is not 'natural." At Applejack's uncomprehending scowl, Luna sighed. We have sheltered thee and thine far too much, my little pony, she thought. "My little pony, little if anything in Equestria is natural. And that is a good thing. Were we to leave Nature to its own design, all of our kingdom would be akin to the Everfree Forest.... worse, even. Many things in life are 'natural'--- disease, pestilence, war, cruelty, greed, depravity--- but we do not abide them. Shall we cast aside medicine, arrest our doctors and nurses, because they 'thwart the natural order?'"
"If thou encountered a pony who was injured, or sick, and thou hadst the means to bind their wounds, the medicine to remedy their illness--- would thou not succor them? What is old age, but the accumulation of injury and ailment?

"Which is just? To kill, or to heal? To do harm, or to do good?"

"Any matter, thou miscomprehendeth what is being attempted. We are not attempting to unseat death. Such lies beyond any feasible power in this mortal universe. What we seek to cure is senescence." Applejack's brow furrowed again. "Old age," Luna clarified. "Tell me, Applejack; thou hast a younger sibling?"

"Ayep. Applebloom. Still tryin' to get her cutie mark."

"Tell me, Applejack. Suppose thou were to discover that thy precious sister had been born with a terrible disease. Inherited in her very bones. One that doomed her to wither, and sicken, her mind falling apart, her body riddled with ailment, every day worse than the last and nothing to hope for but worse for tomorrow; a disease that would doom her to die in sickness and pain and delirium before the end of this same summer. Her life cut brutally short, all her ambitions and dreams and beautiful potential gone, and worst of all, both of you forced to watch as her mind and body shrivelled away? What risks would you take, what Hell would you dare march into, to buy back the years which were robbed from her?

Luna poked Applejack in the chest. "Know you this, Applejack; that is the very fate to which I and my sister have been doomed. You all are as our children, Applejack. No mother should have to bury her children. Yet that is what she and I have had to do, again and again and again, for thousands of years.

"All things die, Applejack. Someday, even my sister and I will die. Some fierce and terrible enemy, or some awful war, or mayhap merely a large boulder falling from above and crushing us. We cannot turn back death, we cannot prevent death from happening eventually. But we will not stand idly by while our little ponies suffer and die for no damned reason." she sat back. " For whatever reason, we were born without the, the sickness that makes our little ponies wither away after so bitterly few years. It would be a terrible wickedness, an explicit sin to not do all in our power to use that mysterious blessing to relieve the suffering of others.

"Think, Applejack," she pressed. "Think about what thou hast already said. Thou hast called it selfishness-- selfishness!-- to want to alleviate your grandmother's pain. Has our thinking become so backwards? That is not selfishness, that is compassion. Selfishness would be for us to hoard the blessing of restored youth to ourselves. E'en if it did not lengthen life by a day, is it not better that ponies spend their remaining years in health and vigor, rather than bedridden and in pain? And if it lengthen their lives, what sin is that?"

"I-- I still don't know," Applejack said. "Anyway, is it even possible? You can't change nature."

Luna smiled enigmatically. "But fair Applejack, Nature is change. It always has been. We have a part, a small part, that we alone can affect. And change starts when we decide."

Applejack brooded. She thought of Applebloom, how as young as she was, how few years she had on this earth. She thought of Granny Smith, slow and tired and hurting, with only more aches and pains to hope for in the future. Really, was what the Princesses proposed to do any different than creating a new medicine, or a new kind of surgery? Was it any different than Granny getting a hip replacement, "thwarting the course of nature?" Was she really so superstitious that she would deny either of them a better tomorrow? "You've... given me a lot to think about, Princess," she said. "I guess... I guess I'm on board with it. For now. If i'r nuthin' more than to find those lost
alicorns." She donned her hat. "Sorry to wake y'all."

"Tis fine, Applejack.," Luna said. She lay back down as the farmpony left. That was most likely the last visit she would have before nightfall, thank heaven. Twilight would save any questions for Celestia. And so long as she had her animal friends with her, Fluttershy would be right as rain. She blinked once, twice---

Her eyes blinked open. She was nose to nose with somepony with violet fur and eyes. "Somehow, even as I thought it, I knew..." Luna muttered. "Hello, Twilight Sparkle."

"I'm so sorry to disturb you Princess Luna but I've been going over the Plan I mean your and Celestia's Plan and I realized there are all sorts of problems that it's going to cause and the more I thought about it the more problems I found and I'd talk with Celestia but she's too busy right now and Spike is overseeing the moving of all our stuff in Ponyville so I can't send her a letter so I've been making notes---" she waved a hoof-full of paper " ---and I just HAD to speak to one of you about---"

An indigo hoof suddenly corked her mouth. "Twilight."

"Yurph?" the frazzle-maned alicorn said.

"Calm down."

"Urfkrfh."

The indigo hoof was removed with a cork-popping sound. Luna regarded her sister's protegee with bleary eyes. Luna was long past the groggy stage at this point and well into sleep-deprived shell shock. She decided to keep it monosyllabic till her body dredged enough energy to operate her brain at full speed. "Notes?"

Twilight nodded.

"Splain."

Twilight sat down and began shuffling through her notes. "Well first off we have the biggy. What happens to these alicorns we find? I mean just the six of us and all of Canterlot is in an uproar. What if we find dozens? Or hundreds? We can't possibly make them ALL princesses--"

Luna snorted in amusement. "Prince." Her bleary mind concocted a vision of Prince Blueblood in a sparkling dress and tiara...

"Oh, right. Princes, too, um, alicorn stallions, right. but still-- just looking at the panic caused today, and extrapolating for increasing numbers of alicorns... and then there's the issue of landed titles and the dispersion of royal authority---"

"Noble families." Yay, four syllables. I'm getting better.

"What?" Twilight paused in the middle of holding up a detailed graph.

"We'll search their family trees," Luna said with an epic yawn. "Everypony's related to somepony. We'll put them in the noble family they're most closely related to."

Twilight tilted her head to one side, her eyebrow cocked skeptically. "What if they don't have any
nobles in their family tree?"

It was Luna's turn to look skeptical. "After thousands of years?" she said. "Thou art not unversed in the salacious ways of the upper crust, Twilight."

The purple alicorn blushed. She was naive, but not historically ignorant. "But what if the nobles object?"

"To having an alicorn in their family?? Well then, in that unlikely event, there shalt be new noble houses in Equestria. Ones founded by alicorns. Any rate, thou art confident we shall find so many alicorns that this shall be an issue?"

Twilight "hmphed." "We used to have one alicorn Princess, when my parents were foals. Then we had two. Then you returned and we had three. Now we have nine. You tell me which way this trend is going." She shrugged. "Even if we don't find another alicorn for a thousand years, the number is only going up. Eventually the title of 'Princess'... or 'Prince'... is going to be as meaningless an honorific as 'the Princess of Whales' or 'Knight of the Bath.'"

"That is the intention," Luna muttered to herself. She and Celestia dreamed idly of the day when 'Princess' was no more reverent a title than 'librarian' or 'smith,' and she and her sister could move among their people without being feared or held in awe.

Twilight naturally didn't hear that. "And then there's the larger part of the plan, indefinitely expanding the lifespan of the average pony," she went on. "At Equestria's current birth rate, our food production will be insufficient to sustain our numbers within just a few--" the indigo hoof corked her mouth again.

"Twilight," Luna said as patiently as she could, "hast thou read of Malthus?" Twilight shook her head 'no.' "Malthus was a pony who lived a thousand years ago, prior to my own fall," Luna said. "He was a scholar and a philosopher and an economist-- though we had not that word for it back then--"

"He was also an ignorant idiot, a misanthropist and a fool.

"He thought famine and poverty made ponies virtuous. He proposed that ponies should be bred like cabbages for the most physically ideal results, and the physically inferior should be culled-- mind thee not that the pegasus would consider the earth pony 'inferior,' or that the unicorns thus regard the pegasis.... Worst, he was a buffoon who insisted that we would all starve to death because Celestia and I 'let' Equestria's population grow too fast, and that our numbers would exceed our farmers' ability to feed us all."

Twilight pulled Luna's hoof away from her mouth. "Oh, right, I read about him recently. He proposed a model he called 'the Parasprite Problem,' didn't he."

Luna nodded. " 'If parasprites double their numbers every hour, how long will it take a barrel half-full of parasprites to fill? Why, only one hour.' This was supposed to be an analogy for how our own numbers would choke the life out of our land in a single generation, before we did realize it." She gave Twilight a shrewd look. "Pray tell, what was the problem with that picture?"

Twilight frowned, thinking it over... "Ponies aren't parasprites, Twilight," Luna finally said. "A pony doth not blindly breed, nor blindly consume. And parasprites do not farm, do not produce, do not create, do not innovate nor do they progress."

Twilight sat back. "But... was he really that far off?"
Luna deadpanned. "Twilight Sparkle, according to the scholarly predictions of Malthus, we all starved to death eight hundred years ago."

Twilight gaped, then snorted in laughter. "I'm guessing he left a few variables out of his equation," she snickered.

"Indeed," Luna said, her voice oozing sarcasm. "Malthus, the silly bugger, did not account for our farmers learning new and better ways to grow; he did not account for our ability to get more out of less land, or that we would have more land, period. He certainly did not account for the fact that, as our prosperity grew, our birth rate declined.... And even when the blessings of foals were abundant, we had more than a surfeit of food, and room, and love for all of them. I have lived thousands of years, Twilight; I have seen famines caused by war, by tyranny, by incompetence of economy, by ruinous taxation, but I am yet to see a famine caused by foals."

Twilight shuffled. "Still," she said. "Do we have a plan? Just in case?"

Luna grunted. "A few, and more than a few," she said. "But the chiefest among these is the faith in our little ponies to thrive, even in adversity."

"But--"

"Thinkest thou on this: how much of a handicap is placed upon us all, as a race, by the burden of old age? How much medicine, how many thousands of hours of labor and millions of bits, are spent upon shoring up aging, dying bodies? What is LOST to us-- how much wisdom and knowledge and experience and skill-- due to minds fading away? What great works are never made, songs never composed, masterpieces never painted, wonders never discovered, performances never played, due to sharp eyes growing dull, sharp ears going deaf, steady hooves and wings and horns growing feeble? Room and food for all the living? How much of a challenge will these truly be for us to solve, once our ponies are unshackled?"

"Twilight, I will be raising the moon in..." Luna looked at the clock on the dresser and groaned. "In far too few hours. Look up at the sky and count the stars then, Twilight. Look at them, Twilight; a thousand thousand suns.... countless numbers of worlds lying fallow, waiting for us.

"They are ours for the taking--- if we do not shrink back."

Twilight blinked once, twice. Then, silently, she bowed and left the room.

As soon as she was out of sight Luna faceplanted in the pillows. "Maker, please," she groaned. "No more visitors..."

"Oh, um. Hello? Princess Luna?"

"ARGh."

"Eep! Oh, I'm very sorry..."

"blargh."

"...But the girls and I were going to order something up from the kitchen, if that's all right with you, and--"
"Arghlbargle."

"...Um. Never mind..."

"blurgh."

"...Are you sure you wouldn't like something yourse--"

"Garrarrarrgh!"

".... eep! Right, never mind g'bye!"

"...Whimper..."

Luna awoke, once again. This time to... bouncing? The entire bed seemed to be jouncing up and down at regular intervals for no perceivable reason. Body aching with the agony of the unrested, she sat up and glared about. A certain pink, frizzy maned alicorn was using the bed as a trampoline. She was gaining some impressive height on each bounce, thanks to her wings-- passing above the strangely missing canopy and nearly touching the ceiling with her nose.

"Wakey wakey sleepyhead!" Pinkie Pie said.

"PINKIE!!" Luna yelled, her face red.

Pinkie paused in midair. "What?"

"I have to raise the moon in--" she looked at the clock. Oh no. She was late by half an hour! She scrambled to untangle herself from the covers.

"No ya don't," Pinkie said, still stuck in midair. Luna regarded her with surprise. "Princess Celestia already took care of that. She said you were gonna be kind of busy anyway."

"I am," Luna said fatalistically.

"Yup!" The pink pony resumed bouncing. "We already had the dress rehearsal for the coronation today while you were asleep, and since you were getting all rested up Celestia said that there would be no better time than right now for you to give me my first lessons in controlling my special magic! Cause I really really wanna have a handle on it Ay-Ess-Ay-Pee, cause my family is gonna be arriving really soon and if they see I'm an alicorn now and I don't have a handle on my luck magic they're all gonna be like-- " here she slapped her hooves to her cheeks, bugged her eyes out and gave a drawn out wilhelm scream "-- and that would be bad..."

Luna faceplanted in the pillows, barely resisting the urge to scream as the pink pony-shaped superball continued to ramble.

And everyone thinks I'm the evil one, she thought.

1)Are you sensing a pattern? Good.

2)Pity her foalhood school teacher.
3) This was the plan--- Celestia would handle the panicking castle staff; Luna would handle the panicking princesses. Luna was going to regret letting her sister take first pick.
Chapter 5

The Coronation went off without a hitch.

No. Seriously. It did.

The decorations were beautiful. The great hall was packed to capacity. The fanfare, the trumpets, the six princesses in their elegant white dresses, manes and tails bedecked with flowers, had paraded in step gracefully down the aisle to accept their tiaras. All of their families were in the first rows; tears of pride and joy in every eye. The traditional parade down the main thoroughfare of Canterlot was a glorious spectacle as well, all six princesses were showered with streamers and rose petals by their adoring, if somewhat overwhelmed, public. It was an event that would be remembered for centuries after as one of the most glorious and extravagant events in Canterlot history.

Getting everything set up for it had been far more eventful.

The previous week...

The mane six were at the train station, eagerly awaiting the arrival of the Royal Express. Celestia and Luna had arranged for their families to be in Canterlot for the coronation, and the train ride was the last leg of the journey for all of them. The girls were all at the station, more or less incognito, all but hopping with a blend of excitement, eagerness and nervousness.

The train-- a special engine, built exclusively for royal business--- pulled into the station in a cloud of steam at twelve on the dot. It was midnight blue with gold filigree, and symbols of the sun and moon prominent on the engine and every car. Guards could be seen on every car through the faintly tinted windows.

The first to disembark was, surprisingly, Spike. He was carrying Peewee and Owlowiscious on his shoulders. He immediately waddled over to Twilight and caught her in a hug, dislodging the two birds. "Twilight! I am so glad to see you!"

"Spike!" Twilight crowed, returning his hug enthusiastically. The baby dragon burped and winced, looking a little queasy. "Urf, not so tight," he said. "I kinda over-ate on the trip."

"What? You did?" Twilight frowned.

"He never could resist my ruby chip cookies," somepony said. Twilight looked up to see her mother and father stepping down out of the train, her mother carrying an obviously depleted picnic basket on her back. They all quickly mobbed in a group hug.

"Oh Twily, it's so good to see you," Velvet said, her eyes shining. "And..." she took in Twilight's carefully tucked-in wings. "My daughter an alicorn princess! I knew you had incredible things in your future, but this!..."

"I bet your brother's fit to be tied," chuckled Night Light. "He here yet?"

Twilight nodded. "He and Cadence arrived by balloon earlier today..."
The next car down disgorged a familiar trio: Granny Smith, Big Macintosh, and an exuberant Applebloom who was so excited she was bouncing like a superball. The yellow filly hit Applejack at a dead run, nearly bowling her over. Her big brother and grandmother followed at a more sedate pace. They were followed off the car by several more ponies with apple-themed cutie marks. And they were followed by several more. And several more after that....


"Pritnear," Granny Smith cackled. "An' the Oranges are in the next car!... ooh, thankye, sonny," the Apple matriarch said to one of the Guards; he had appeared carrying her walker. He handed it to her with a bow and returned to his post.

Applejack couldn't help noticing that Granny looked tired under all her good cheer, or that she was walking more slowly than usual, favoring her bad hip. For the first time Applejack saw the world through Celestia and Luna's eyes. Through the eyes of an alicorn. Blessed with long, full lives and time in abundance-- forced to watch as their loved ones disappeared like mayflies, devoured by pain and sickness and debilitation. Their fate; Her fate, now.

Which is just? To kill, or to heal? To do harm, or to do good?

What risks would you take, what Hell would you dare march into, to buy back the years which were robbed from her?

...It would be a terrible wickedness... to not relieve the suffering of others....

Nature is change. It always has been. And it starts when we decide.

Hold on, Granny, Applejack thought. Just a little longer. So help me you'll be runnin' through the orchards with your great great great grandfoals, if'n I have anything at all to say about it.

Rarity's family could be seen disembarking in the midst of the crowd; they peeled away from the mob of Apples and joined the fashionista, trading hugs and nuzzles. Sweetiebelle was there, and like Applebloom was wound like a watchspring. Every sentence she spoke was practically nothing but a sequence of high pitched squeaks.

Further down the track, a much smaller reunion was taking place. a teal pegasus stallion with a rainbow tail and mane was cautiously descending the steps from the car. He was stocky, with that slightly sagging, heavy bellied build of a former high school athlete-- still hale but, as one might kindly put it, obviously past his prime. Alongside him was a mare with an orange and yellow mane. The two looked around the station apprehensively.

Rainbow Dash saw them. "Mom! Dad! Over here!!" She galloped to meet him, beaming.

The two pegasi looked up and saw her coming. their faces lit up with smiles, twenty years seemed to fall away. "There's my little Rainbow !" They hugged exuberantly. Rainbow Blaze, Dash's father, backed up a step, grinning. "Let me get a look at--" He paused, eyes crossing slightly as he looked at her new horn. "Hmm. That's gonna take some getting used to," he muttered.

"Tell me about it," Dash said, blowing a lock of her mane out of her face. "Didja have a good trip?"

"Heh, yeah," her father said with a laugh. "You should see the inside of the train. Swan-kee. And we had somepony to keep us company, too." At this, a familiar orange pegasus filly with a purple mane squeezed her way out between Dash's parents.
"Rainbow Dash!"] Scootaloo jumped off the bottom step and caught air. She landed with a fourfooted ker-klop in front of her idol, practically vibrating in glee. "Omigosh omigosh omigosh omigosh!" She squealed. "I can't believe it! You're really really REALLY an alicorn? Omigosh omigosh omigosh, like a hundred and twenty percent cooler! And... and you invited... me... to be at your crowning thingy..." At this last part the filly actually teared up.

Rainbow Blaze chuckled at the filly. "You shoulda seen her face when we stopped in Ponyville to pick her up. Thought she was gonna faint before they got her on the train."

Dash's mother beamed at them both. "Oh my yes. I spent the whole ride telling her all my stories about you when you were her age..."

At this Rainbow Dash turned a little green. "Oh jeez. All of them??" She sidled closer to her father. She shot a look around her to make sure nopony was close. "Even the... 'Iddle Binky' story?"

Rainbow Blaze and his wife chuckled even more. "Especially the Iddle Binky story," he said. Rainbow Dash's groan of despair only made him laugh louder.

Scootaloo for her part seemed oblivious to the mention of Iddle Binky. "Wow, so this is really happening! So when do you start flying with the Wonderbolts, huh? Now they just gotta let you in. Did they get you your flight suit yet? When's your first performance---"

"Hey wait wait wait," Rainbow Dash said. "The Wonderbolts? What---" it sunk in what Scootaloo was saying. Rainbow Dash scratched the back of her head with one hoof. "Oh. That." She cleared her throat. "Um... it doesn't look like I'm gonna be in the Wonderbolts, Scoot. Um. Ever."

Scootaloo stopped in mid flutter-hop and thunked to the ground. The look on her face was like she'd just been told Saturdays had been cancelled forever and that the only flavor of ice cream in the world was now brussels sprouts. "Whaaaat?"

Rainbow Dash gave a crooked grin. "YYYeah. I'm a Princess now. So they kinda work for me, now. And... it'd look wrong if I was flying around as one of them. Like I'd bought my way in with my crown, or something." Besides, irony of ironies, she was an alicorn—she was too good, now. She was stronger, faster, tougher and more agile than even the best of the Wonderbolts now, by a ridiculous margin. A quick day of trials at the Wonderbolts training camp had proven that. The Wonderbolts were a team, and even if she magically disguised herself she stuck out too far. She'd either have to fly at a fraction of her ability, or she'd have endangered her teammates with her sheer speed and power.(5)

That had been a bitter pill to swallow indeed. Dash had moped for two whole days after that. She'd maybe even cried a little. A little. When she was alone. Maybe. Aw heck, she'd bawled her stupid eyes out.

As it was, it looked like Scootaloo was about to burst into tears herself. "You're never gonna be a Wonderbolt?" she quavered. "Never?"

Immediately Rainbow Dash threw a wing around her and pulled her in for a hug. "Hey, hey, hey, it's not so bad. Really! Besides--" she looked around, then whispered in the filly's ear, "Wait'll I show you the compensation prize I get." Scootaloo's teary expression gave way for a mystified one.

Twilight Sparkle came over at that moment, Spike at her side, Owlowiscious and Peewee perched on her back. "Say Rainbow," she said. "Has Fluttershy's family made an appearance yet?" She peered over Dash's shoulder to where the butter-yellow alicorn stood meekly waiting.
Dash looked around. "Nah, I don't see 'em yet." She chuckled. "Believe me, you'll know 'em when you see 'em."

Rarity wandered over and joined them. "I couldn't help overhearing, darlings. I must say I am rather curious to see what her parents are like; she rarely talks about them." She paused thoughtfully. "Though granted she rarely talks at all, but still..."

Scootaloo giggled. "I bet her dad's real big and loud," she said, thinking of her own father. "A real big loud muscle-y type."

"Nah, no way," Spike said. "I bet it's her MOM that's big and loud. Like the fat lady in the opera."

"Spike...!" Twilight scolded.

"Well?" Spike cocked an eyebrow, arms folded.

Twilight relented. "It's almost sort of expected, isn't it." She looked at Rainbow Dash. "Rainbow Dash, you've known her longest..."

Rainbow Dash shook her head."Oh no, I'm not spillin' anything," she said with a smirk. "You ponies will just have to wait and see for yourselves."

Several other ponyvillians in the crowd had gravitated to the conversation. "I hope they're nice," Sweetiebelle said. "It'd be awful if they weren't, and that was the reason she's so shy.." the other cutie mark crusaders nodded.

"Well, I hate to say it," Twilight murmured, "but the way Fluttershy is, I get the feeling she had a... very demanding upbringing... probably very strict and heavy-hoofed parents." she eyed Rainbow Dash, waiting for a reaction. The rainbow-maned pegasus kept her poker face. "Anyway, simple common sense and standard narrative tropes dictate that at least one member of her immediate family is loud, boisterous, rambunctious and extroverted, as justification for why she herself is so introverted and shy."

"Five bits says it's the Dad who's the loud one," Applejack said.

"My money's on the mother," Big Macintosh murmured. "it's allus the womenfolk in the family..." he made no further explanation. Applejack shot him a funny look but said nothing.

"Ah bet she has a whole big family of big loud types," Applebloom said.

"I think the poor dear comes from a broken home," Rarity said. She could never resist succumbing to a romantically tragic fantasy.

"Oh I want in on this action," somepony said. Bits and bets soon started exchanging hooves; somehow Pinkie Pie ended up holding the hat for all the wagers.

Everypony saw Fluttershy brighten and start trotting toward the train. "Shh shh shh! Here they come," somepony else whispered. Every pony on the boardwalk fell silent, leaning forward and waiting with bated breath for Fluttershy's parents to step down off the train. Everyone held their breath... then everyone blinked. And blinked again.

The first pony to appear was...a butter yellow pegasus mare with a flowing pink mane and tail. She was wearing a sun hat, shades, and a pair of saddlebags with a potted flower sticking out of them. Her mane was done up in a loose bun on the back of her neck, and her cutie mark was of three blooming flowers, but otherwise she was almost indistinguishable from Fluttershy. "Flutters!" she
called in delight... in a tiny, whispery voice that rivaled Fluttershy's own.

"Mommy!" Fluttershy said, running forward to nuzzle with her. After a moment she stepped back, looking apprehensive. "Could Daddy make it? I.. I know he's awful busy at work..."

"For this? He wouldn't miss it for the world," her mother said. "Honey?" She looked back into the train car. "Are you there?"

The crowd on the platform waited with bated breath. This was it.

Right behind Fluttershy's mother was... a butter yellow pegasus stallion with a pink mane and tail. He was wearing a bow tie, and his cutie mark was of three white puffs of cloud. He disembarked with a sheepish smile. "Hello, baby doll," he said in a (you guessed it) soft, meek voice. "Give us a hug?..." he paused. "... If you don't mind, that is..."

Fluttershy giggled and gave him a hug and a nose-nuzzle. Both their noses squeaked. "Oh, and your brother came too, of course--"

"Okay, this has gotta be it," Applebloom said. Everypony held their breath and leaned forward again.

Fluttershy looked behind her father. "Oh, my," she said, surprised. "Hello, little brother. MY, how you've grown." Out of the shadows of the train stairwell stepped--

--A butter yellow pegasus colt with a pink mane. He regarded the crowd out on the platform with wide, fawn-like eyes, then ducked behind his father, blushing...

SweetieBelle stood on her friends' shoulders. "OH COME ON!" she yelled. Rainbow Dash fell to the floor, laughing so hard she couldn't breathe.

"Well, that's that," Pinkie said. "Looks like Babs wins the pot. She bet on 'just like her family...'"

Babs took the hatful of bits and hoof-pumped. "Yeah!" She said, giving Applebloom a hoof-bump. "Ice cream's on me, Crusaders!"

Fluttershy jumped--- actually, her whole family jumped-- and turned around. "Oh! Um, everyone? This is my family." Her nose crinkled. "This is my mother, Rose Petal-- she's Cloudsdale's best botanist and gardener."

"Um, hello?" the older mare said, hiding a bit behind the brim of her hat."Actually, I'm the only botanist and gardener in Cloudsdale..."

"And this is my father, Gossamer Cloud," Fluttershy continued. "He's a cloud sculptor and architect." The pegasus stallion grinned awkwardly at everyone.


"Hydroponics, actually," Rose Petal said. Her cheeks turned pink. "It's how her father and I met," she said. "I wanted some way to grow flowers in Cloudsdale so badly, and he--"

"And I, ah, came up with a way to do it," Gossamer Cloud said, a hint of pride in his quiet voice. "Just thicken the clouds, mix in some plant food, and the flowers will get their food and water right out of the cloud."

"Interesting," Twilight said, even as she quietly made note to keep a lookout for any discolored
rainclouds in the future.

"And my baby brother Breezy Shy, but we all call him Bishi for short," Fluttershy said. "Come on out and say hi, Bishi." She nosed the reluctant colt out from behind her father.

'Bishi' stumbled out into the open, blinking awkwardly. There was no other word for it: the colt was pretty. He had the same flowing mane and tail as his older sister, the same large dewy wet eyes, and once he’d caught his balance he was every bit as graceful as his older sister. He had no cutie mark, and had a peachy-soft look to him nopony could fail to notice. He was so girly and sweet looking he practically sparkled.

He found himself staring at the Cutie Mark Crusaders. The four blank flank fillies stared back. He brightened up and smiled. "Oh, there are some pretty girls here in Canterlot!" He blurted out. He seemingly realized he'd said that aloud and turned bright red, curling up on himself and batting his ebony lashes.

"Oh! Now Bishi, that was very forward of you," Rose Petal scolded with a voice as harsh as cotton swabs. "Now apologize."

"I'm sorry," Bishi said, his blush spreading up his face and down his neck.

"Oh my," Fluttershy said. "You'll have to forgive him. He can be very brash and straightforward..."

The four girls got the strangest expressions on their faces. It took a moment for the older siblings and Dash to place it; it was alarmingly similar to the look they'd gotten the time Pinkie Pie had plunked a jumbo triple-decker chocolate sundae in front of the four them and handed each one a spoon. Dang, Applejack thought. They look like they're about to ask where the whipped cream is. Applebloom looked up at her sister. "Can we keep him?" she asked, her eyes sparkling and an alarming grin on her face.

"Say what?" Applejack said, cocking an eyebrow. And smirking.

Applebloom realized what she said. her cheeks bloomed red. "Ah, I, ah, meant can we take him.... To... the ice cream shop in the station! Yeah. Um, to.. get to know him better. And. Stuff. Babs, you're still buyin' right?"

"Oh yeah, definitely," the city filly said, not taking her eyes off the shy colt.

Sweetiebelle looked at Bishi's mother. "If that's all right with you...?" she asked, her own grin framed by powder pink cheeks.

"Oh, um, I suppose...?"

"Great!" The quartet of fillies immediately surrounded the hapless pegasus colt. "C'mon, Let's go..." They herded him down the station platform, giggling; he looked back over their heads at the crowd of grownups, confusion and alarm plain on his face. The last they heard was a bewildered, Fluttershy-like "squeak" before the group vanished around the corner.

The mane six and their families watched them go; most of them didn't know whether to "squee" at the cuteness or laugh their flanks off at the colt's bewilderment. Twilight chuckled and tossed Spike a couple of bits. "Do us all a favor, Spike," she said. "Go follow them and make sure poor Bishi doesn't end up like Smarty Pants almost did. If they ask, you're just buying a ginger pop to settle your stomach."

"Can do, Twilight," Spike said, saluting. He waddled off after the foals.
Twilight shook her head and looked over at Pinkie Pie. The pink alicorn was looking at the train with a certain wistfulness; her mane hadn't gone flat, but it was looking rather droopy. "Is everything all right, Pinkie?" Twilight asked.

Pinkie smiled and shook her head. "I'm okay, Twilight," she said. "I... I kind of hoped my family would come, too, but I guess--"

"Pinkamena?"

Pinkie turned. Standing on the platform was a quintet of ponies; a tan stallion with a gray mane, a gray mare with her mane in a bun, a shawl and granny spectacles on her nose, and three younger mares Pinkie's own age, in varying shades of gray. The one in the granny glasses had a box balanced across her back. All four of them had an apprehensive look in their eyes.

"Pinkamena, is that you?" the older mare said again.

"Don't know as who else it could be with that mane and cutie mark, Mother," the stallion said, doffing his pilgrim hat. His face was worried and careworn, but he smiled at Pinkie all the same.

Pinkie's eyes started to water. "You came...?"

Her father nodded. "I reckon we did," he said laconically.

Standing on the front porch, shaking the gravel off her hooves was a snow white alicorn mare with a fashionably styled purple mane and tail. She dusted off the hem of her elegant gown, primped her hair and kicked the door open with one dainty hoof, sending the pony behind it flying.

"HEL-lo, Mister Pie," she said, stepping through the door and addressing the prone rock farmer sprawled against the far wall with a smile as dazzling as her sapphire earrings. "My name is Princess Rarity. (Oh I do love saying that! Hee!) I'm here to let you know that you and your family are cordially invited to the royal coronation of the Princesses of Harmony, including the coronation of your own wonderful daughter Princess Pinkamena Pie."

The elegant and vaguely terrifying mare stepped into the middle of the room. "Oh do come out, everypony, there's no need to be uncivilized." Slowly the rest of the family came out from behind the overturned furniture where they had taken cover. "There, you see? I just want you to know that dear Pinkamena harbors no ill will, in fact nothing would make her happier than to see you there on her very special day.

"And nothing would make her unhappier than if her family were to SHUN her and not make an appearance." The mare stuck out a pouty lip. "And if poor Pinkie were to be unhappy..."

"That would make the rest of us... very... VERY... UPSET!!" Lightning crashed outside. Eldritch lightning crackled down the alicorn's horn and sprayed from her mantled wings, throwing the shadows of the room into high relief. After a few moments the sizzling lightning faded away. The alicorn minced over to the rough-cut dining room table and laid a stack of train tickets out in a neat little fan. "Those are your train tickets; all five of you I believe? Yes. The Royal Express will be by..."
the local train station on the time and date listed, do be there. Come as you are. Oh, and don't worry about accommodations, they have guest rooms at the palace. Ta!"

With that, she gracefully stepped out of the house and leapt into the sky, leaving the rock farming family to mop the puddles on their floor, look over their tickets, and memorize the date and time VERY carefully.

She never even noticed the four other hoofprint-bottomed impact craters scattered around the farmstead...

"We, uh, kind of got the hint we should come," one of her sisters said.

Pinkie took a step toward them. "...I thought you didn't want anything to do with me--- because of the Jinx," she said. "That's why you sent me away..."

Her father looked pained. "I reckon it's our fault you thought that," he said.

"We sent you away to protect you, Pinkamena," her mother said. "Folks knew the Jinx ran in our family. They left us alone so long as they thought nopony in our family had it anymore, but once we saw it in you... we sent you someplace we thought you'd be safe from... that kind of cruelty." She huffed. "Ponyville's always been a harbor for odd doin's, even before all this Nightmare-- Elements-- Discord-- whatever business. We figured the Jinx wouldn't be so obvious there."

"B-but the invitation?"

Her sisters looked like they were ready to cry themselves. "We didn't respond to your invitation because you're a princess now," one of the daughters said. "We were afraid that if anyone knew you were related to a bunch of dusty old rock farmers, they'd use it against you."

"Especially if they knew it was a bunch of Jinxed rock farmers..." her sister added.

That did it. Pinkie started gushing tears. She all but flung herself at her family, catching them all in a bear hug. "I don't care if you're a bunch of dusty old rock farmers," she sobbed. "You're MY dusty old rock farmers, and if anypony doesn't like that they can bite my plot!"

"Pinkamena! Mind your language," Mother Pie scolded. "You're a princess now--!"

"Don't care!"

A minute or two passed with a great number of tears among the family, and more than a few hankies among the watchers on the platform. Pinkie sniffled. "And-- aren't you scared now.... cause I'm an alicorn now, and all magicky and stuff...?"

"Yea verily, right out of my breeches,"(10) her father confessed. "But... I have faith we can learn to cope..."

"Well you don't need to be," Twilight said, stepping up. "Pinkie isn't 'Jinxed', Mr and Mrs. Pie. She's just got a very unusual and very special gift. And Princess Luna herself has taken her as her own personal pupil, so that she can learn how to use it better."

"Well, that's.... good," Father Pie said. He carefully refrained from noting that his daughter was
receiving magical instruction from the former Nightmare Moon. Well, one can't have everything perfect in this world, he reflected. I guess if you don't want somepony to go down a bad road, one could do worse for guidance than somepony who had, how was the saying? Who had already seen the elephant... He looked at Twilight seriously. "We thank you all for looking after my little filly," he said. "And," he added under his breath, "For scaring a little common sense into us..."

Twilight and the others did their best to look innocent.(11)

"Oh, Pinkie!" the eldest daughter took the box her mother had been carrying. "We baked you a surprise. Your favorites!"

Pinkie gasped. "For me?" She tore open the box; nestled inside were two dozen dark chocolate cupcakes with bright red frosting. "Oh you guys-- you remembered! Twilight, you gotta try one, these are my Mom's special recipe!"

Twilight smiled. "Well... Pinkie's the best darn baker in Ponyville. It'd be foolish to pass up a cupcake made by the pony that taught her..." she plucked a single cupcake out of the box and popped it in her mouth. "Mmm, rich and moist---"

Her eyes suddenly started gushing tears. Her cheeks bulged, her face turned brilliant red. She leapt into the air, hooves flailing, as her mane burst into flame. She hit the ground running and vanished around the corner--- presumably headed for the ice cream parlor and hopeful relief from the flames. They heard her howl in the distance.

"Gee," said the youngest Pie. "I guess she doesn't like Tabasco frosting."

"Yeah," said Pinky, grabbing a cupcake herself and chewing. "Go figure."

---

1) the dour moon princess had complained that "it looked like some ancient pagan fertility ritual." Till both Rarity and Fluttershy had given her a double barreled dose of the Sad Puppy Dog Eyes. The flowers stayed.

2) Yes, even Pinkie Pie. Rarity had even managed to give her a hairdo-- her mane cascading down one side of her neck in a waterfall of curls. It actually lasted through the whole ceremony.

3) Which for six alicorn mares generally meant leaving behind all the royal jewelry and most of the guards, and covering either their horns or their wings. Hats or saddlebags were de rigueur whenever they went out these days. Of course even that was overkill sometimes; it was surprising how long it took some ponies to notice they had both wings and horns. Of course the fact that they weren't twice as tall as everypony else and their manes and tails didn't flow in nonexistent breezes helped a bit, too...

4) The first thing Applejack had put on her schedule was an appointment with the royal surgeons, right after the coronation. Granny wasn't going back home till she had that new hip, doggone it, if Applejack had to hog tie her and deliver her to the doctors herself.

5) Picture a team of WWII flying tigers trying to incorporate an F-15 in their group.

6) It was a lousy poker face. It consisted of her biting her lip and holding her breath, looking like she was about to explode.

7) Well, and the horn. But you knew about that.
8) Three guards promptly collapsed from insulin shock.
9) And there went five more.
10) He didn't own any britches, but that's just quibbling.
11) And failed miserably.
Chapter 6

The five foals were all at a table in the train station sweet shoppe. the pink-maned colt on one side of the round table, picking away shyly at his ice cream, the four girls more or less on the other.

Spike was at the counter, nursing a tall glass of ginger pop and watching the goings on at their table. It had been an interesting detente, at first; all four of the fillies trying to sit right next to Breezy Shy at the same time (and prevent any of the others from doing so) while he studiously labored to sit as far away from any of them as possible. For a minute it looked like a serious scuffle might break out but when the ice cream had arrived, they'd all taken their seats. By some unspoken consensus they'd all ended up in their current arrangement, the colt on one side, the fillies on the other, giggleing and favoring him with looks as gooey as the sundaes melting in front of them.

"So.... do you come here often?" Applebloom said. She thought over what she said. "To. Um... the ground. I mean. Away from Cloudsdale..." She resisted the urge to facehoof.

"Oh. Um. Not usually," Bishi said, his voice barely above a whisper. "We're thinking of moving to Misty Mountain. It's high enough that the mountain pokes through the clouds, so Mom could plant her flowers on real ground."

"What sorta flowers does your mom plant?" Babs asked.

"Oh, all kinds," Bishi said, smiling. Babs felt her knees turn to water. "She especially likes growing ones from Everfree Forest. It's where she got Snapdragon."

"Snapdragon?" The girls asked in unison.

"Say, Ma'am, that there's an interesting flower you got there," Applejack said. She poked a hoof at the potted plant in Rose Petal's saddlebag. "I ain't never seen one quite like--- Yyeeowch!" She yanked her hoof back as the exotic bloom suddenly growled, sprouted teeth and snapped at her.

"Snapdragon! For shame, snapping at one of the princesses!" Rose Petal scolded. "For shame!" The fanged bloom looked decidedly unrepentant. It growled and crouched down in its terracotta pot. "I'm sorry, Princess Applejack; he must be feeling temperamental from the long trip...."

"Ah'll keep that in mind," the farmpony said, backing away wide-eyed.

"Oh that reminds me, sweetie," Rose Petal said to her daughter. "We had an eensy bit of trouble with Angel. While my back was turned he went and chewed on Audrey..."

"Oh dear!" Fluttershy covered her mouth with her hooves.

"Oh it's all right. We got Audrey to spit him right back out," Rose Petal said with a cheery smile. "So no harm done."

"...I'm just glad she replants them in the Everfree when they get too big," Bishi said.
"Remind me to never go on a walk through your garden," Scootaloo said.

"So how excited are you to have your sister become an alicorn princess?" Sweetiebelle squeaked, crinkling her nose at Bishi. "I'm so excited I think I could burst!"

"Yes," Bishi said. "It's... nice."

The girls stared at him. "He's Fluttershy's baby brother all right," Applebloom said. "'Nice?'"

"D-don't get me wrong," Bishi said hastily. "It's awesome that Fluttershy's an alicorn and a princess. It's just that... I..." he looked down and sighed.

"I'm scared of how things will change." "We don't see each other often as it is," he said. "Now that she's a princess, she'll be living in Canterlot all the time. And she'll be busy with princess stuff."

"Yeah," Applebloom said. It suddenly dawned on her that Applejack was in the same boat. She'd be... she'd be leaving. She wouldn't be living at the farm any more. Oh, Granny and Big Mac had said she'd be back at the farm all the time, as much as possible-- but how much often could that really be?

Sweetie's smile was fading away too. What would happen to the Carousel Boutique? And who would Sweetiebelle stay with when her parents went on their many business trips? Would Rarity forget all about her?

"Hey, c'mon, all youse mopey ponies," Babs said suddenly. "It's not like they're gonna be a jillion miles away or nuttin'. They'll be right in Canterlot, just a train ride away, right? And they're all magical now! They could just teleport from the castle right to your livin' rooms whenever they want!" She reached across the table and thumped Breezy Shy in the shoulder. "Hey, I bet Fluttershy'll visit youse all the time now. Just 'poof', and she'll go from Canterlot ta Cloudsdale!"

The others brightened a bit at this. "That's right," Sweetiebelle said. "They can visit us in a blink of an eye now."

"But what if ponies won't let them?" Applebloom fretted.

Scootaloo snorted. "They're princesses now. They can pretty much do whatever they want!"

"If they still want to," Bishi said quietly. His dewy blue eyes filled with worry. "What if being an alicorn changes them? I mean... with all that magic and immortality and stuff they could start getting all weird--"

At that moment Twilight Sparkle burst into the ice cream shop. She was ranting and hooting and gabbling in what sounded like demented Zebrican, eyes and nose gushing, smoke pouring out of her mouth and ears. She ran to the counter, dancing a mad tarantella, and threw down a hoof full of bits. "Gimme I'cree, hot hot hot HOT HOT--'nilla! Nilla I'cree!"

The pony behind the counter shrank back, holding up his icecream scoop defensively. "Wha wha, hu how much? A cone? Two scoops?"

"ALL OB ID!" Twilight screamed, pointing a hoof at the tub behind the counter. The soda jerk jumped and scrambled to hoof over the freshly opened bucket. As soon as it was up on the counter, Twilight grabbed it. She rammed her entire head in, mouth wide open. Steam rolled up; she sagged in relief, the only signs of life the occasional "blurp" as she gulped her way to the bottom.
The foals stared silently at the spectacle. "Well," Sweetiebelle said finally, "She seems about the same..."

After a minute or so Twilight surfaced for air. "Aaahhhhhhh. Ahem. Towel, please?" The soda jerk quietly handed her a clean damp bar towel and carefully backed away. "For future reference," she announced to all present, her voice muffled by the towel as she mopped off her face, "Don't eat any of Mother Pie's special recipe cupcakes."

"Tabasco frosting, right?" Applebloom said. "Pinkie entered them in the bake-off once."

Twilight stared, but refrained from commenting. "Say, why all the long faces?" she asked, dropping the towel on the counter.

Spike butted in. "They're kind of worried that you girls are gonna change and drift away, now that you're alicorns," he said. The foals glared at him. "What? I'm sitting five feet away. I'm supposed to go deaf now?"

"Oh, kids," Twilight said kindly, "ponies change all the time. It's called growing up. But that doesn't mean they're not the same pony. Rarity and Fluttershy and Applejack and yes, Rainbow Dash--" this was directed at Scootaloo-- "will always love you and be there for you."

"Even when you're all busy with Princess stuff?" Applebloom said doubtfully. She came from a family of hard workers, and her sister was the picture of a workaholic; she knew darn well that Applejack could forget everything else in the world once she got set into something that needed doing. And princesses always had something that needed doing.

"Even then," Twilight reassured. At the same time though, the thought tickled at the back of her mind. She was reminded that to the foals, this ascendance didn't mean a grand adventure. It meant that their big sisters-- and big sister stand in, in the case of Rainbow Dash-- were going away. Maybe for years, on this quest. Promises of frequent visits and letters were a sorry bandage for that.

The gears and wheels in Twilight's mind began to turn. Maybe she had an idea to help with that...

It was the evening after the coronation. The Coronation Gala (2) was underway, and every noblepony in Equestria was in attendance. The new princesses were circulating amongst the dukes, duchesses, counts and barons and lords and ladies, making everypony's acquaintance(3) and subjecting themselves to more social stress than most of them had experienced in their entire lives before. To be fair, some of them were experiencing less stress than others. Twilight Sparkle was in a private discussion with Princess Celestia, Luna and a certain other individual, Applejack and Rainbow Dash didn't give two toots what the fancy-pants ponies thought of them.

Rarity, of course, was having the time of her life.

"Why hello, Darlings!" she said, swanning her way to a sizeable clique of fussily dressed ponies on the ballroom floor. "Are you all having fun?"

There was no mistaking her real reason for singling out that particular group; Prince Blueblood was there in the midst of them. She had spotted his blow-dried mane from across the room and had zeroed in. His expression when he'd seen her heading his way had been priceless; it was what one might see on the face of a shipwrecked sailor when he looks up and sees fins slicing the water. "Ahh, Prince Blueblood, how nice to see you again!"
Blueblood looked as if he was strangling on his cravat. "To what do we owe your charming presence...?" he choked a moment. "...Princess Rarity?"

"Oh well, I'm just going about, meeting and greeting and getting to know everyone," she said casually. She flicked her fan about casually in her magic. "Though it is nice to see a familiar face in the crowd, isn't it, Blueblood dear." She crinkled her nose at him.

"You know Prince Blueblood?" One of the other dissipated young nobles standing with him said. "Er. That is to say, from... before?"

"Before my ascension," Rarity finished for him. "Oh, of course! Why he was my escort for the Grand Galloping Gala, weren't you dear?" The last time Blueblood had seen a smile like that, he'd been at the Canterlot aquarium and it had come with a fin over top of it. "Oh, that does make quite the story to tell..."

"Oh well, you know, old times gone by and all that," Blueblood said, laughing nervously, his eyes pleading. "I must say it was quite the honor to attend the coronation.."

"You attended? How nice," Rarity said. She knew quite well that he'd attended; she even knew the exact moment he'd seen and recognized her. When she'd passed his seat on her walk down the aisle he'd made a sound like someone stepping on a baby seal. "Why the other girls will be delighted to know you were there. Especially Applejack, I'm sure."

"Applejack...?" Blueblood said carefully. He sounded like he was trying to speak a foreign language.

"Surely you remember her." Rarity paused, for just a half a heartbeat. Her smile never faltered. "You spit her food on the floor and told her it was 'common carnival fare.' "

"Iiiieee..."

"You do recall. It was shortly after you used my cloak to mop a spill on the floor, and just before the cake--" She tsks. "Oh dear, memories do tend to slip. I'm sure Princess Applejack can refresh your memory. Ah there she is!" She started to wave a hoof.

"Oh my is that Duke Wellington?" Blueblood exclaimed in a terrified falsetto. "Oh do excuse me everyone I fear I have some important business involving boots to discuss if you will please excuse me..." He didn't so much hurry away as frantically scuttle, his hooves skidding on the tile floor in his haste to be quit of this particular fresh slice of hell.

"What a shame," Rarity sighed, watching him go. "That's the life of a prince, one supposes-- busy busy busy." She gave a sidelong glance to the rest of Blueblood's erstwhile circle, taking quiet note of the ones who looked embarrassed, aghast at the slaughter they'd just witnessed, or who were suppressing smirks of malevolent glee. "Oh do lighten up, everypony." she teased in a lowered voice, fetching a drink from a passing waiter and knocking it back in one go. "I'll let him off the hook eventually... but I wouldn't be pony if I didn't tweak him just a little." The others chuckled and the tension lowered a bit. "Now, do please introduce yourselves, I do want to get to know you all..."

Twilight ducked back out onto the balcony, letting the french door swing shut behind her. "Well, Rarity seems to be having fun," she said.

Celestia chuckled. "Well, I'm glad to hear that, at least," she said. "Now, what precisely did you pull us out here to discuss?"
"Indeed," said Discord irritably. "I'm missing out on the canape's."

Twilight regarded the draconequus thoughtfully. It was strange, after all that happened, how comfortable she felt around the chaos entity. Maybe it was just time and experience. Maybe it was Fluttershy's influence, and Discord's sincere, if somewhat fitful, desire to reform.

Maybe it was the heavy rune-engraved iron collar clamped around his neck that diminished his power to a mere trickle, and which could turn him back to stone in an instant if he broke his parole.

(5)

"Oh cease thy prattle, Discord," Luna said. "Thou didst consume seven hors d'oeuvre trays alone already."

"So?"

"So thou left the treats and ate the trays!"

"Exactly. Sterling silver, absolutely not filling..."

Celestia shook her head. "Anyway, Twilight; you were saying?"

Twilight bit her lip and took a deep breath. She searched for the words to start. "I want you to know— I agree with 'The Plan,' " she said, making quote marks in the air with her hooves. "We need to find the alicorns. We need to find the cure. I just want to make sure that this... that this expedition is one hundred percent necessary."

Celestia regarded her pupil. "How do you mean?" She asked carefully. She wasn't sure if she wanted to know; her former student had developed a disconcerting habit of dropping metaphorical bombs at her feet.

Twilight paced back and forth. "I mean, have we already exhausted all other options?" she said. "The... what did you call the Senescence Cure, Princess?"

"We threw around a few names--" Celestia said.

"I wanted to call it 'Bob,' " Discord interjected.

"—But we decided on calling it the Panacea," Celestia said, rolling her eyes in annoyance at Discord.

"Whaaaat? Bob is a perfectly decent name..."

"The Panacea. Do we absolutely have to have the power of alicorns, of an alicorn race, to create it? I mean, we have unicorn magic, pegasus magic, earth pony magic, dragon magic, zebra magic, we have the elements of Harmony, the phoenixes, the wild magic of the Everfree— surely there's some magical plant or other in there— " She waved her hoof at Discord. "We have a draconequus, for pony's sakes, a creature who can alter reality at a whim.... "

"Believe me, Twilight, we researched all those avenues," Celestia said. "Many held promise. The phoenixes in particular. Poor Philomena; I think I plucked more feathers out of her tail for experimental potions than I can count. And I think Luna and I both picked at least three of every plant in the Everfree..."

"Tis not a matter of sheer power, Twilight," Luna explained. "But a matter of mindpower. Hooves to share the workload, minds to pursue all the possible avenues of discovery." She sighed. "We have mortal ponies scattered all over the world, doing their own research. But their lifespans are so brief--
they barely have time to learn anything before another need be found to carry on their work. This is work for those who have more than a few years, and more magic than a single unicorn can muster. And we are too few in number to do all the work..."

"And too few to make up a proper study sample, for anypony trying to figure out alicorn immortality," Twilight said. "I know. But..." she shot an accusing glare at Discord. "Well, what about him? Can't he just--- snap his fingers and make a potion or a fountain of youth or something?"

Discord snorted. "Just because Chaos magic seems to have no rules, doesn't mean it has no limits," he said disdainfully. He tapped the restraining collar around his neck. "Case in point.

"Among other things, it's Chaos magic. Which means it's unpredictable. Sure, I can get the general result I want, but Chaos magic always does its own thing, to some degree. Remember the soup tureen?"

"Yes, I remember the soup tureen," Twilight said dryly. At their first informal "friendly dinner" with the reformed Draconequus, he had animated the tableware to serve the meal. She vividly recalled the sensation of soup being sprayed up her nose by an irate ceramic fish. To this day Discord insisted the soup tureen had assaulted her with soup of its own accord.

"Well there you go. I could try to whip up a fountain of youth, or a potion of youth, or a magic live-forever fruit, or what have you. For that matter, I have... I've been a good little boy and been helping Tia and Lulu out in the lab. But the results..." for a moment the draconequus looked disappointed and disgusted.

Celestia nodded. "Sometimes it made the person who took it age backwards... younger and younger, till they were infants. Other times they were trapped in time, living in super slow motion. Or they'd turn into a bristlecone pine. Or it wore off in mere minutes. Or it would backfire sometimes, aging them decades...and those were the pleasant results." She shuddered. "We spent more time undoing the effects than actually doing anything."

"And his particular magical knowledge, while vast, isn't really useful in our research," Luna said. "'Tis just... too different."

"Yes. You see--" Discord was suddenly wearing a painters smock and fedora and holding a brush and painters' mortarboard "--- Chaos magic is more of an art than a science..." he proceeded to paint one of the statues on the balcony in polka dots and checkerboards. "In fact it seems to get irritable if you try to get all science-y with it." He said the last in a flat voice as he regarded his work. "Bleh. I wanted stripes."

"Hard to do lab work when you try to add two and two and keep getting 'potato,' " Celestia admitted.

"I thought so. I just had to ask, to be sure." Twilight lowered her head. She was startled by the feel of Discord's paw resting on her withers. She looked up at him in surprise. "Believe me, Twilight Sparkle," he said, his voice unnaturally solemn. "If I could just snap my fingers and change this, I would. It's not the kind of thing that chaos magic can do."

Is he really sincere? she thought in astonishment.

Celestia's voice filled her mind. Yes, he is, Twilight, she said. Fluttershy's friendship with him, as trite and insincere as it may have seemed, has affected him deeply. Why do you imagine he was so petty and carelessly cruel? For tens of thousands of years, before Luna and I were even born, he has remained utterly alone and friendless, because he knew that any friendship he had with a mortal creature would be gone in a blink of his eye. For a moment Celestia looked pitying. Fluttershy's
friendship only had to be the slightest bit sincere to pierce his armor and break his heart. Love can be a terrible and frightening thing, even in the weakest of doses.

Twilight was profoundly moved.

*Be that as it may, you had more you wished to discuss with us I believe?* Celestia said with a twinkle in her eye. I think Discord is getting impatient.

"I'm right here you know," he said, annoyed.

"Sorry. And moving on to my next question. Or problem. Whatever."

"Which is?" Celestia asked.

"I'm not sure I like splitting up the Elements of Harmony," Twilight said. She started to pace again. "In fact, I don't like it at all. That handicaps Equestria's single greatest defense. And I know we're all alicorns now but... only two of us have any training with magic, and it's going to take years to get the others up to par on their elementary magic. Much less teaching them how to find emergent or nascent alicorns... which brings up another thing..."

"Is she always this..." Discord's face screwed up in distaste. "Analytical?"

"She and her friends defeated you, you tell me," Celestia said, amused.

---

*To retrieve your missing elements just make sense of this change of events. Twists and turns are my master plan. Then find the elements back where you began.* Discord vanished in a puff of fuschia scented smoke.

The elements gathered in a huddle. *Okay, that first part about twists and turns..."* Rainbow Dash said. "It's gotta be that big hedge maze I saw outside--"

Twilight groaned. "No Dash, it's not the hedge maze," she said, her eyebrows in a level line. "Well how do you know--" Dash began belligerently.

"Because it's a riddle and that's the first thing that comes to mind. Trust me, I know riddles, I've read every bit of riddle folklore in the library and It's NEVER the first thing that comes to mind," Twilight said. "Riddles are always about what you DON'T expect. The most important part of a riddle, nine times out of ten, is the last part, because it puts a twist on the end that changes the meaning of the the rest. Hedge mazes don't end 'back where you began'--- they end in the middle. Regular mazes start on one end and finish on the other. So it's not a maze... besides, he said it's where WE all began."

Applejack ruminated on this. "She's right," she said. "So... where did we begin?"

---

"I stood waiting in that stupid maze for nearly an hour," Discord grumbled. "While they teleported back to that library and dug out that book. Turned around and there they were, all decked out in their elements..."

"We know," Luna said smugly. "We saw the expression on thy petrified face. It was priceless."
"In other words, yes, she's always like this," Discord said dryly.

"Well, yes. She got a lot more assertive about that sort of thing after the, ah, Crystal Empire incident," Celestia temporized. "You should have seen how she reacted when she found out about your 'flip-mind' trick you always used. She was rather upset that I hadn't let her know you could poke around in somepony's brain like that."

Discord smirked. "Yeah, that was a good gag..." he reminisced.

"Well," Celestia went on. "That was nothing compared to the shakeup from Winter Wrap-Up..."

"But snow melts."

"Ayeah?" Applejack said suspiciously.

"Look, This has been bugging me... I didn't say anything but..." Twilight shook her head and went on."Okay, look, I can buy having to wake up all the hibernating animals and guiding the birds back; around here they're all practically Fluttershy's pets anyway. I can buy building nests for the birds even though they can make their own, because hey, we still make birdhouses, right? I can even buy shoveling snow off the rooftops-- that's something everypony should do regularly in winter anyway if it gets too deep. I can buy plowing the streets. But shoveling snow off the FIELDS? That's ridiculous!"

"Why?"

"Because SNOW MELTS!"

Applejack cocked an eyebrow. "So what's yer point, Twi?"

"My point? Would you just---" Twilight facehooved, and started over. "Applejack. What do you do with the snow that you plow off the fields?"

"Well, we just pile it up in big heaps over yonder--"

"And what happens to it?"

Applejack shot her a sarcastic look. "It melts, Twilight. I get that."

"When the Pegasi move the clouds and let the stronger sunshine through," Twilight added. Applejack nodded. "Which it would do anyway if you just left it there! In fact it would melt faster if you left laid out on the fields than if you heap it in big piles!"

"But we need t' get down to the soil and plant new grass and flowers!"

"Only because you scrape them off every time you run those plows over them! Leave the snow be, let it melt, and it'll water the grass and flowers and all the seeds they dropped last year. And plants might grow a little better if you weren't scraping all the topsoil off, too! And look at this--" the exasperated unicorn started digging through the bags of seeds Caramel had brought. "TREE seeds? Maybe you didn't notice but those are kind of PERENNIAL..."

"But Twilight, if we don't get rid of the snow, the meltoff will make the river flood and flood out all the poor little forest animals--"
"BUT THE SNOW MELTS ANYWAY, NO MATTER WHERE YOU PILE IT, FLUTTERSHY! IT ALL ENDS UP IN THE RIVER ANYWAY! ARGH!" Twilight waved her hooves in the air in frustration. "What idiot pony came UP with this Winter Wrapup program??"

"Hey now, don't y'all be talkin' like that about ol' Sandwich..." Applejack said, her voice lowering dangerously.

"Sandwich??" Twilight asked.

"Soup Sandwich, the first mayor of Ponyville," Applejack said. "You seen his statue in the town square."

Twilight paused. "The one wearing pants."

"Ayep."

"On his head."

There was a brief pause as Applejack, for the first time, reflected on the advisability of trusting the wisdom of a pony who routinely wore his trousers for a hat. "...Um... ayep."

Twilight gave her a thousand yard stare. "I'm starting to see which way this is going..."

"And then there was that little thing in the fall..." Celestia ruminated idly.

"Now, my little ponies, competition is all well and good. But due to your rivalry-- and cheating-- the Running of the Leaves still needs to be redone--"

"Uh, Princess?"

"...Yes, Twilight?"

"We have how many ponies competing in the Running of the Leaves?"

"...Um..."

"And you're saying that just two ponies squabbling and doing a bad job was enough to keep the leaves from falling when a couple hundred other ponies were running as well?"

"Twilight--"

"And these ponies are all doing a worse job than gravity? You know, it could just be the leaves aren't READY to fall...."

"...Twilight," Celestia said with a strained smile, "you're kind of buggering up my lesson on Friendship..."

"And half of them are pegasi! Call me obtuse but wouldn't more leaves come down if the pegasi
"And Rainbow Dash told me about their little trip to the Cloudsdale weather factory..." Luna contributed.

"Snowflakes."
"Yeah!"
"By hoof."
"Ah, yeah...?"
"One at a time."
"Umm... yeah? Whatcher point, egghead?"

"Rainbow Dash, do you know how many snowflakes are in a single cubic foot of snow...? Call it a hunch but I think the way water freezes into crystals on the way down has more to do with it..."

"And then there was Tornado Day," Celestia brooded.

"Commander Spitfire, let me get this straight. You want to suck all the water out of our reservoir with a giant tornado, all the way up to Cloudsdale, so that you can make clouds and rain it back down--- to, among other things, fill up our reservoir. Could I possibly interest you in this naturally occurring law of physics known as evaporation...?"

"She let it go at the time, but, like I said, after the Crystal Empire-- she got a burr under her saddle, went over her Friendship Reports and did a little critical review," Celestia sighed. "Granted, after we cut out the... redundancies and irregularities... she'd pointed out, we'd reduced the time and labor costs for the weather bureau alone by ninety eight percent. Thanks to the savings, Ponyville can now afford to build their Town Hall out of something sturdier than paper mache'."

"We did keep the snowflake factory," Luna said. "As civic employment for handicapped pegasi."

"We're trying to get her to tone back the snark a bit," Celestia said. "But I think she backed up something of a reserve."

"I'm right here, you know," Twilight said, scowling.

"Ahem. Sorry, Twilight. You were saying?"
Twilight sat down. "The second thing is-- shouldn't we hold off on scattering to the four winds? I mean, wouldn't it make more sense to start looking closer to home? We haven't even searched the immediate area yet. I mean, if you've lost your house key in your living room, you don't run out into the street to look just because the light's better." This elicited a muffled snerk from Luna. "What are the attributes for ascendancy anyway? Magical power and skill? Is it something hereditary? Something else entirely? To be fair we don't know why the Elements picked us. I mean, there are surely thousands of ponies who are as loyal and honest and kind and generous and funny and magical out there. We need to know what to look for, as well as where." She looked thoughtful. "And come to think of it, if the elements really do gravitate towards potential alicorns like we think-- and vise versa-- we really should start the search closer to where we started with them."

"I dunno," Discord said, rubbing his chin. "Seems to me if the Elements were that indiscriminate, yon Everfree should be armpits-deep in alicorns by now."

"All the more reason to start our search closer to home," Twilight said. "We might find countless nascents right under our noses..."

She looked out over the crenellations at the night, and the city below. Millions of ponies, right there, just to begin with.

She glanced to one side. Further over amongst the walls and towers of the palace she saw a couple, standing out on another balcony. Squinting, she saw it was none other than her BBBFF, Shining Armor and his wife Princess Cadence. They had flown by zeppelin all the way from the Crystal Empire for the coronation, and obviously were taking a break from the festivities for a private moment. She blushed and grinned when she saw them nuzzling. It was already the stuff of fairy tales throughout equestria; an immortal princess and her dashing hero, happily ever after.

A calculating look crossed Twilight's face. Her smile widened to a grin. She turned back to the three immortals with her. "...And I know just where to start looking."

---

1) And she'd sock you if you suggested it.

2) Quite grand, but not quite Galloping.

3) A great number of ponies would be desperately hoping that certain of the princesses would quickly forget their names, and learning that alas, Princess Pinkie never. Forgot. Anypony.

4) He would spend the next month fruitlessly trying to devise a way to become a reclusive anonymous hermit and still keep his household staff.

5) Celestia may have believed in the power of Friendship; but Applejack and Twilight believed in the power of common sense.
Chapter 7

There was a loud knocking at the door. Shining Armor grumbled and pulled the pillow off his head. "Who is it?" he called out. Cadence grumbled next to him. He gave her an apology smooch on the ear.

"Private Double Time, Sir," came the voice from the other side of the door. "The Princesses request your presence in the Western Solarium."

"Understood," Shining Armor called back. "Tell them I'll be there in ten minutes." Shining heard the pony's hoofbeats as he trotted away. Regretfully, Shining Armor left his nice warm bed and his nice warm wife and went to jump in the shower. "I really hope this is something important," he groused as he gave his wet mane a quick combing and tugged on his uniform tunic.

Five minutes later he was trotting into the solarium. The large circular room was occupied not by Celestia and Luna as he expected, but by Twilight and her five friends. "Oh, right," he chuckled. "The other princesses. It's gonna take a while to get used to that. Morning, Twily, what's up?"

"You'll see in a moment. BBBFF." His little sister trotted to the center of the room where the intricate mosaic on the floor formed a seven sided star. "Would you come over here and stand right here, please?"

Curious, he obliged. *Wait. I don't remember the floor here having a mosaic--*

"Okay, now stand here and don't move, this won't take a minute." Twilight trotted away from him and took her place next to her friends, standing on one spot of the intricate and yes, very new pattern on the marble tile. He tried to move... and found that Twilight had magically glued his hooves to the floor. "Twily--?" Shining Armor said uncertainly. His alarm level went up when the circle of mares around him started to chant.

It went even higher when he noticed that Spike was there. Wearing a helmet. And crouching behind a small bunker made of sandbags.

"*From one to another, another to one. A mark of one's destiny singled out alone, unfulfilled;*

"*Twilight, what is this--*

*From all of us together, To each of us together, With the marks of our destinies made one,*

"*Twilight this isn't funny--*

*and one shared by all without end--*

"I'M TELLING MOM--!"

The Solarium bloomed with light.
Cadence sat bolt upright in bed. "Ebbeh?" she said.

What had that been? It felt like someone had played a power chord with guitar strings wired to her horn. She quickly shook off the last vestiges of sleep and tumbled out of bed, instinctively heading in the direction of the strange, extradimensional "twang."

By the time the cobwebs had cleared she was already halfway to the source. "What could it have been? The last time I felt anything like that was the night that Twily and her friends..." she gulped as she realized what she was saying.

She broke from a canter to a gallop.

She skidded to a halt as she arrived at the Western Solarium. All six of the Bearers were there, standing in a circle on the edges of an ornate pattern charred in the floor. Rather than staring at the huge smoldering blast spot in the center of the floor, however, they were all looking up at... where the glass ceiling of the solarium used to be. She saw Spike sticking his head up warily over a pile of sandbags. "Whoa," he said. "At least you contained the collateral damage better this time."

She could see Twilight biting her lip as she stared up into the sky. "Come on," she heard her whisper. "Please, please..."

Cadence edged closer. To her horror she saw the tattered remains of a tunic-- Shining Armor's tunic--lying around the charred spot on the floor. "Shining!! Twilight, what happened here??" She started forward.

Then leapt back as a shimmering ball of light fell through the shattered ceiling. It touched down in the center of the circle, slowly taking form of a stallion standing with his head lowered.

"Shiney!" Cadence said.

Shining said nothing. He raised his head-- and flared out his wings.

An almost inaudible gasp went around the room. There was silence for half a heartbeat.

Then Cadence fell to the floor, shrieking with laughter.

Shining Armor stood there, struggling to smother his humiliation as the Diarchs(1) slowly scanned him with their magics. It wasn't easy. His wife was still lying on her stomach on the floor, giggling like a loon; his sister and her friends were all trying to stifle snickers and smirks(2). Even Spike, the heartless traitor, was still hiccuping from his most recent laughing fit.

Whatever happened to 'bros stick together?' Shining wondered glumly.

Even Celestia was biting her lip, darn it. "Well..." she said, finally letting her horn dim and stepping away. "The good news is... it worked."

This was met with blinks of astonishment all around. "You mean..." Twilight said hopefully.

"Yes," Celestia said. "Shining Armor is now an alicorn." There was a burst of cheers and congratulations all around.
"B-but..." Twilight said. She pointed. "But the wings...!"

Everypony started snickering again. Disgusted, Shining Armor regarded his new wings.

His new, perfectly formed, foal sized wings.

"Well, as near as I can explain it," Celestia said, amusement in her voice, "Is that the... well, the essence of alicornism in Shining Armor was just enough for the transformation. Just barely. A drop less and nothing would have happened. But... there wasn't enough to make an entire, full grown alicorn out of him all at once. So the spell gave him, well..."

"Iddle baby wings," Princess Luna cooed, fluffing one tiny pinion with her hoof.

Half the ponies gathered collapsed to the floor.

"Essentially, he's an adult unicorn, but an infant pegasus and earth pony," Celestia continued when everyone regained their composure. "Fortunately everything is healthy and hale; his earth pony and pegasus sides will grow and catch up with his healthy strapping unicorn stallion side in due time."

"I'm so, so sorry, BBBFF," Twilight said, managing to look guilty even as she smothered her giggles. "It was supposed to be--- be this wonderful gift for you, but..."

"Wait... please, I want to be sure I understand," Cadence said suddenly. "Does this mean...?" Her eyes grew wide and dewy, filled with a wonderful, terrible hope.

Luna and Celestia smiled at Cadence, their eyes shining. "Strewth, dear Cadence," Luna said. "Thy husband is now an alicorn, and as immortal as thee."

That was all it took. Cadence's eyes welled up and overflowed; tears gushed down her face. She held her hooves to her mouth as she looked at her husband. "Oh, Shining," she said. "All this time... I never dared hope... I never dared dream...!

They met each other in a rush; crying, laughing, kissing away each other's sudden tears. The room glowed with Cadence's love aura. The girls squeed and cooed; Rarity all but swooned at the romance of it. Even Rainbow Dash 'dawwed a little.

"I think, in this case, that we should keep this particular ascension 'on the down low,' I believe is the phrase?" Celestia said. "At least for the immediate future."

Shining Armor started. "But-- but what do I do now?" He said. He turned to face the Diarchs. "I can't possibly fulfill my duties like THIS!" He flared his wings, instantly sending the girls back into a fit of snickers and explosive snorts.

"Calm thyself, Shining Armor," Luna said. "Twill not be thusly for long. Thy wings should be fully grown within a year or so. Less, if thou keepest a robust alicorn diet." (3)

"But what do I do in the meanwhile?" he fretted.

"Oh, not to worry, darling," Rarity said. "A little retailoring of your uniform and you can wear it over your wings till they grow in." She tossed her mane. "I can hide the earl of Trottingham's paunch, I can hide a pair of growing wings."

Twilight stepped over to where Shining Armor stood nuzzling Cadence. "I shouldn't have sprung this on you without telling you," Twilight said meekly. "I figured if it worked, then everything was fine, if nothing happened, no harm done... forgive me?"
Shining Armor grinned wryly. "Baby sister casts a spell and turns me into an alicorn without my permission? I think I'll get over it," he said. "Right now though I'm going to get back to our suite and stay out of sight— till I get some appropriate covering for these." He nodded at one of his wings. He turned to head back to his and Cadence's room.

Cadence pressed her cheek against his as she leaned against his side. "Sounds like a good idea," she said, nuzzling him. "Besides there are things I have to show you about being an alicorn. Changes in your magic, wing exercises..." she moved the nuzzling to his ear. "Preening lessons..."

Shining Armor slowly grinned. "Tell me more..."

The diarchs and the mane six watched them leave. "Well, that sort of clinches it," Twilight said with a sigh. "We can't find the Panacea without more ascensions. We can't ascend more ponies till we know more about how and why they ascend... and how to do it right. And we can't learn more until we go out and find more ascended alicorns.

"It looks like the great alicorn hunt is on, after all."

---

1) he was just going to have to get used to thinking of Celestia and Luna that way, rather than as "the Princesses." There were altogether too many princesses running around at the moment.

2) Except for Princess Rainbow Dash, of course. She had nearly passed out laughing.

3) Golden apples, zapapple jam, and a few other exotic foodstuffs. Celestia kept trying to add "cake, lots of cake" to the list, to the aggravation of her dietician.
Chapter 8

We now turn our reader's eye back one day, to the Coronation Gala and the goings-on of certain other ponies....

"Okay, one-two-three SHOOT!" Two hooves, one indigo and silver-clad, one white clad in gilt, shot out. The two diarchs regarded their hooves, bemused.

"....I have no idea why we thought that would help," Celestia admitted ruefully.

"Well, sister, we must needs decide this somehow," Luna said. "One of us must oversee the Gala proper, whilst the other tends to the Junior Gala for the colts and fillies of the noble families." Both sisters winced. It had seemed such a good idea at the time. To some extent it still was; for ages both of them had wanted to introduce the newer generation of nobles and royals to courtly functions at a younger age. Now that it was upon them, they were having to face the down side of the situation.

"You do realize what this means," Celestia sighed. "One of us is going to spend the entire evening overseeing a teeming ballroom filled with troublesome, over-privileged, spoiled brats--"

"And the other will have to tend the Junior Gala," Luna quipped.

"That joke was funnier the first twenty times you said it," Celestia said dryly. "Now seriously..."

"Mmph. Either choice doth have drawbacks," Luna said, worrying her lower lip as she thought it over. "But methinks the adults would be miffed at thy absence, while the foals would feel suppressed by thy presence."

"That whole 'all-powerful mother figure' thing again," Celestia agreed, sighing. "Hard to have fun when Mom is looming over you. Are you sure, Luna? I didn't want you to feel you were being.. well.."

Luna thought for a moment, then nodded. "Yes. All in all, twould be best if thou attended the main festivities, whilst I oversaw the Junior."

"Agreed, then. Though I do think your task will be the easier one." Celestia rolled her eyes. "Maker only knows what havoc my former student and her five friends will unleash this time."

Luna scoffed. "They are alicorn princesses now, Celestia--"

"Exactly my point."

"And are bound to be better behaved," Luna finished firmly. "I on the other hand, will be hosting a party with the brats of the upper crust."

"I'm sure you can take them, if they don't gang up on you." Celestia smirked.

"And the Cutie Mark Crusaders." Luna continued.

"Oooh."

"Who apparently have reached, ahem, that age, where they start noticing boys--"
"Oh dear."

"--and are, all three, *quite enamored* of Princess Fluttershy's younger brother, who is attending as well."

"Oh...DEAR." The two matriarchs of the alicorns stared at each other for an interminable moment. They both broke out in grins of malicious glee.

"Oh this is going to be too good..." Celestia giggled.

"A wager?" Luna asked.

Celestia grinned. "The usual stakes?" she asked (1)

"Double or nuthin'."

"Deal." Had anypony wandered through the room at that moment, they would have been treated to the vision of the monarchs of the sun and moon hawking and spitting on their hooves like farmponies and brohoofing as they cackled like cut rate villains.

---

Sweetiebelle hopped nervously in place, just the tiniest bit. She couldn't help it; her insides felt like she'd eaten a bowl of jumping beans. She couldn't believe it. Here she was, about to go into her very first ultra-swanky grownups party! In Canterlot! In the castle, no less! Well, it was actually a sort of second party just for colts and fillies, set off to the side of the real adult party. But still!

The adults and the foals had parted ways; the adults were waiting outside the doors to the main ballroom, just down the hall, while the colts and fillies were gathering here at the doors to the night gallery. There was already a teeming crowd of colts and fillies in fancy dress, chattering amongst themselves.

She struggled to behave herself as she waited outside the big double doors for her friends to get there. Rarity had just about gone bonkers, doing up her little sister's hair and putting together just the right ensemble for Sweetiebelle's big high-society debut: soft baby blue dress, a frilled saddle, and a choker with a blue heart gem. She'd even used makeup. Just a little. It would kill Rarity if Sweetie messed up her hairdo or rumpled her dress or scuffed up her shoes or smudged the teeny bit of mascara or--

Maybe she should just go in and stand in a corner, quietly, till the party was over.

While she was mulling that thought over her friends came trotting up. "Sweetiebelle, there y'are!" It was Applebloom. She was wearing a scalloped red dress trimmed in tiny leaves, dress shoes, and an emerald green bow in place of her usual pink one. It seemed none of the other Crusaders had escaped Rarity unscathed; Babs was decked out in a simple green wrap and a glittering white rhinestone necklace, and even Scootaloo was fancied up in a lavender dress and a new mane-do. She didn't look happy about it, naturally. "At least the necklace is cool," Sweetiebelle heard her mutter as she tapped the lightning-bolt pendant with a hoof.

"I think you look very nice, Scootaloo," a soft voice said. It was Breezy Shy. He came walking up to where the girls clustered together and ducked his head shyly. "You all do. If you don't mind my saying so..."

The girls looked at him; he was decked out in a colt's tuxedo and gold shoes. His pink mane was
combed and slicked back in a sleek, wet style that Sweetiebelle thought made him look very aristocratic. To judge by the smiles on the other girls' faces, they approved of his look too.

"Oh, Y-y-you too," Scootaloo said. To Sweetiebelle's astonishment, Scootaloo did something Sweetiebelle would have never bet on in a million years. She blushed and giggled. She seemed to realize what she'd done; her eyes flew wide and her hoof flew up to her mouth. Before anyone could comment, though, the doors to the Gallery swung open. They could see the gallery beyond, dazzling in chandelier light, with Princess Luna standing attendance on a raised dais. "Welcome, one and all," the Princess of the Moon said in booming, stentorian tones, "to the Junior Gala!"

The crowd of youngsters began pouring in. Before Bloom, Babs or Sweetie could take a step, Scootaloo blocked their path. She spoke rapidly and in a voice low enough that Bishi wouldn't hear. "If any of you breathe a word about what just happened to anypony anywhere anytime ever I will murder you in your sleep." The other three girls-- even Babs-- gulped at the homicidal menace in the pegasus' eyes and nodded, making 'zippered lip' motions with their hooves.

"Oh, um, pardon me," Bishi said, oblivious to the interplay going on right in front of him. "Ladies first." He made a sweeping gesture with one hoof, stepping aside. Scootaloo's face went from scowl to beaming smile instantly. The girls bustled in through the doors smiling, giggling and it must be said, simpering at the pink-maned pegasus colt.

The five of them stood in the entrance, bedazzled by the sparkling dance room. Somepony somewhere struck up an elegant ballroom quartet as colts and fillies from all over Equestria began to mingle. Sweetiebelle began bouncing up and down on her hooves again. "Oh boy oh boy oh boy," she said. "This is going to be the Best. Night. Ever!"

Luna bit back a sigh. The party was going swimmingly, in the fashion of courtly gatherings. The lights were bright, the decorations were elegant, the music refined, the drinks and hors d'oeuvres were a treat to the eye, and the guests were looking bored. What had she been thinking? Galas of this sort were boring to adults, of course they would be boring to colts and fillies! Indeed, after the initial novelty of attending a "real live grown-up" party had worn off, the youngsters had quickly started growing nervous, restless and bored. "This is not working," she muttered to herself.

"You don't say," murmured one of the two Guards standing at her side. Luna gave her the stinkeye. She had made it a practice to let her night guard ponies speak freely and be a bit more informal than her sister's soldiers(2), but this was a bit indecorous. "Do you have some suggestion you would like to make, my dear guardspony?" she said a trifle tersely.

"Um, loosen up things a bit?" the thestral mare said without looking up.

"The purpose of the Junior Gala," Luna reminded them sternly, "Is to introduce the younger sons and daughters of the nobility to high-class events, so that they can become accustomed to them and learn to--"

"--to be as boring and dull as their parents?" the thestral mare finished. "Your Highness?"

Her partner--strangely enough, a white pegasus from the Day Guard-- coughed discreetly. "What I think my partner is saying, your majesty," he said in a low voice, "Is perhaps this is a bit too formal. Something more appropriate--"

"--Fun--" the nightguard mare interjected.
"...to a party for the younger set might liven the crowd up. Ahem. So to speak." The stallion managed, somehow, to glare at his alternate without turning his head, his eyes, or even altering his expression.

"Because?" Luna pressed.

"Because even you aren't enjoying this?" This from the mare.

Luna's eyebrows tabled. "Touche," she said. "So what would you recommend, then?"

The night guard mare gave a subtle half-smile and discreetly raised one wing. Tucked up against her side was a small stack of music CDs with rather garish and low-brow labels on their jewel cases. "I took the liberty of, ah, securing some samples from your Highness' music collection in case of emergency," she said.

"Oh thank the maker," Luna muttered, snatching the CDs up in her magical aura. "If I had to listen to any more Neighthoven I'd have lost my mind. He was boring even when he was alive." She quickly trotted over to the pony running the sound system and turned them over. The pony grinned and nodded. A moment later Neighthoven's 14th symphony ended prematurely with the screech of a record needle. The strains of violins and piano were summarily replaced with something lighter, more modern, and with a great deal more bounce to it. Luna lightly tapped one hoof and nodded to the beat, smiling to herself as the youngsters perked up and began moving out onto the dance floor.

To her consternation though, while quite a few youngsters paired off and started dancing, the vast majority suddenly seemed to be congregating to the walls; the colts to her left, the fillies to her right, many with noticeable looks of panic on their faces. "What..?" she said, waving her hoof at the two groups, baffled.

"Oh dear." the night guard thestral said, clearly struggling not to laugh. "Cootie phobia."

The lunar princess stared at her open mouthed, utter befuddlement plain on her face. "Cootie... phobia...?" She sounded like somepony trying to repeat a phrase they'd heard in some exotic foreign tongue.

The thestral guard smothered a giggle. "When you started the music, they took it as a cue that they have to dance." Luna waved her hoof, urging her to expound on this. "With each other, your Highness. They just realized that there are foals of the opposite gender in the room, and they're expected to dance with them." She flipped her hoof in the air. "Oh no! Boys! Oh no, Girls! Cootie Central! Eeee!" Her day guard partner ducked his chin and struggled to smother a snort of amusement.

Luna sighed and facehooved.

Breezy Shy was finding the Junior Gala to be rather... busy. He was in the company of four cheerful and outgoing fillies, and as a gentlepony he found himself kept rather busy dancing attendance on all four, fetching cups of punch, holding open doors, pulling out cushions to sit on, that sort of thing. He didn't mind, of course. It was always nice to be together with friends, and having good manners was all about making other ponies feel at ease.

The girls all seemed to be a bit tense, though. Shooting each other funny looks, and one could hardly start to ask him something without one of the others interrupting to ask something else or send him off for another cup of punch. He wished he knew what to do about it; four of them trying to talk to...
him or walk with him or stand next to him at the same time seemed to really be putting them on edge. They kept shouldering into each other too...

Things finally came to loggerheads when the music suddenly changed from quiet chamber music to something peppy and obviously meant to be danced to. The girls all froze, then looked at him. "Bishi, would you--" "Hey would you like to--" "Hey let's dance Bishi--" "Bishi would you like to dance with me--" They all stopped, glared at each other, and started quibbling.

"Hey, Ah asked first--"
"Did not--"
"Hey youse--"
"I was first--"
"Were not!"

"HEY!" Breezy yelped, starting to panic. The girls all flinched and fell silent, flushing. Breezy coughed and blushed. "Um, I know you're all trying to be nice and dance with me," he said. "And I'd love to dance with all of you...but I really can't dance with all of you at once. And there's no reason to get in a quarrel over it. I'm sure there will be plenty of dances tonight."

The CMC looked chagrined and looked away from each other. "O-okay," Applebloom said finally. "We're sorry, Bishi." The others mumbled apologies as well.

"That's okay," Breezy said with a smile. He turned to Scootaloo. "May I have this dance? Um, if that's alright..." he was interrupted by Scoot's squeal of glee as the pegasus filly all but dragged him out onto the dance floor. The three other fillies watched them go, then turned to each other.

"Let's not fight anymore over Bishi," Applebloom said. "Okay?"

"Yeah, definitely. There ain't no need for it." Babs added.

"Yanno what, I'm gonna... check out what music they're gonna play," Sweetiebelle said suddenly. "Catch you later." She trotted off.

"Yeah, I'm gonna go check out the buffet, see what kinda fancy foods fancy ponies eat," Applebloom said. She headed off in the opposite direction.

"Yeah and I'm... gonna stand here and talk to myself," Babs deadpanned. "Whatever." She headed off in a third direction, just to be different.

Breezy found out quickly that Scootaloo was a whirlwind on the dance floor. She spun him around and had him out of breath in no time flat. "You certainly like to dance, don't you," he managed to gasp between breaths. Scootaloo just laughed and did a high kick over his head. "Goodness!" He decided to save his breath and concentrated on keeping up with her.

The first song ended and the two pegasus foals stood there panting and laughing. Another song kicked in, as lively as the first. Scootaloo grinned. "One more?"

"But--" Breezy started to say.
"Please?" the orange filly started to beg, grinning. She glanced up, though, and her smile faded. Breezy looked up; several of the older pegasus colts and fillies were taking the dance to the air, doing flips and loop-the-loops around each other in an aerial jig. As he watched Scootaloo's smile disappear entirely. "Never mind," she mumbled, starting to leave the dance floor.

"Wait, what's wrong?" Breezy asked.

Scootaloo looked over her shoulder at him, biting her lip. "I.. I can't..."

His hoof rested on her shoulder. "You can't fly yet?" Scootaloo nodded jerkily, ashamed. Bishi smiled. "Sure you can."

Scootaloo blinked at him, then scowled. "No I can't, I oughta know--"

"Yes, you can," Bishi said firmly. "Let me show you. Here, give me your hooves." He held out his forehooves to her. Puzzled, she turned around and rested her forehooves on top of his. "Now close your eyes..." She closed them obediently. "Now. Hold your forelegs down while I push up. Flap your wings. Up and down... okay... faster now.... just a little more..."

Scootaloo felt his hooves pressing up on hers. They felt strange all of a sudden, warm and tingly...Her cheeks got warm. Her wings got all warm and tingly too. she was surprised at how strong he was, he was lifting her up so that her back hoof tips started to leave the floor.

"Okay, now open your eyes."

Scootaloo blinked, and she was not just hovering an inch off the floor. She and Bishi were hovering together, halfway to the ceiling. She gasped and started. "Don't let go!" Bishi said hastily. She nodded nervously and kept her hooves firmly in his.

"H-how?" she yelped.

Bishi smiled, his eyes twinkling. "All ponies are magical," he said. "The magic comes out of us through our horns, our wings and our hooves. I'm using some of my magic--" he nodded at his hooves "And pushing it out of my hooves, and into you... to push your magic out through your wings." His smile got wider. "See? You have plenty of magic inside you, you just needed a little help to get it to come out."

"B-but I couldn't do this myself--"

"You will someday, I'm sure," Breezy Shy assured her. "My mom says 'Anypony can do anything if they have someone to share it with.' "

Scootaloo looked in his eyes and felt her insides turn to goo.

One song later, Breezy Shy left Scootaloo standing by the DJ and bashfully escorted Sweetie Belle out on the floor. Scootaloo smiled goofily at the pony manning the CD player. "Having a good time, kid?" he asked her.

Scootaloo nodded, giggled, and hiccuped.

---

Fancy Toff (Toffee to his friends), third son of the Earl of Winnipeg, found the Junior Gala to be a
bit... plebeian. No, he corrected himself, that wasn't the correct term. Plebeian meant "common." Commoners were interesting. Or at least amusing. This party wasn't. He was only thirteen, but he'd been acclimated to the high society circles of his parents since he'd been out of diapers, and this was all depressingly familiar. The same swanky decor, the same overdressed outfits, the same music, the same idle chatter of ponies trying to impress one another with their family's wealth or standing-- the only real difference was that the ponies in question were rather shorter. Well, that and most of them weren't complete twits just yet. At least the younger ones... the teenagers were well on their way to being affectatious prats like their parents. In these circles, a cutie mark was practically a marker for "I have learned to be a stuffy prig."

Perhaps he was just in a bad mood. Getting trapped in a conversation with Upper Crust's obnoxious son for the past fifteen minutes would make anypony ready to gnaw off his own leg to get away, he figured. Blimey.

Thankfully Princess Luna had swapped out the music for something a little more... festive, and the older colts and fillies had ceased from prattling about daddy's new mansion and mummy's new yacht and moved out onto the dance floor. Toffee decided to skip the dancing for now (and evade the simpering fillies who were already sharpening their training talons for snatching up potential husbands) and cruise the buffet line.

He put a plate together and sought out a seat cushion. He found himself sitting next to a yellow filly about his age with a candy apple red mane and wearing a somewhat apple-themed dress who was nonchalantly stuffing her face with canape's. She gave him a polite nod. "Howdy," she said... hastily setting her plate down and covering her mouth with a hoof when she realized she'd spoken with her mouth full. "Pardon."

"Quite all right," he said drily. His ear twitched at her drawling accent. "I say, are you from Appleoosa?" How rustic. Imagine some dusty Appaloosan coming to a Canterlot Gala...

"Oh, uh, no, but ah got a cousin who lives thar," the filly said. "Ah come from Ponyville."

Ponyville! That got his interest. "Strewth!" he said. "That little town where all the ruckus started?"

The filly pulled a wry grimace at him. "Y'all 're gonna have to be more specific than that," she said. "Ponyville might as well be called Ruckus Central." She popped another canape' in her mouth, chewing solidly.

Toffee laughed. "Where all the new Princesses ascended!" he said.

The filly shrugged. "Yeah, I guess that'd be the big'un to most folks," she admitted.

"I can't imagine what kind of a town it is where six alicorns showing up is small news," Toffee said, a little amused. Good heavens, were all country folk really that hard to impress? He was starting to wonder if she was a little thick.

"You don't know Ponyville," the filly said matter-of-factly. "I'm Applebloom, by the way." She stuck out her hoof, obviously to shake.

Toffee took her hoof in his, like he'd been shown, and kissed it. "Fancy Toff," he said. "But my friends call me Toffee." The hoof kiss startled Applebloom so badly she almost tipped off her cushion. She pulled her hoof back a bit quickly, blushing.

"Well ain't you forward," she said uncertainly, tucking the offended hoof in toward herself.

Toffee flushed, ears flicked back. "Sorry," he said. "That's supposed to be how a gentlepony greets a
lady. " No doubt she's from the sticks if she doesn't know about courtly behavior.

"A lady?" Applebloom said. "Ah ain't no lady, I'm just an Apple." There was a smile on her face though and her cheeks were pink.


"She's mah big sister," Applebloom confirmed.

Toffee's mouth hung open in astonishment. "Should I bow, or something?" he laughed. *Oh this was too rich!*

To his astonishment Applebloom stuck out her tongue and blew a raspberry at him. "No way. I'd never hear the end of it!"

There was a brief lull in the conversation. Applebloom filled it by stuffing more tidbits from her plate into her mouth. "Sooo, how are you liking life in Canterlot so far?" Toffee finally ventured.

Applebloom shrugged. "Ah ain't really here to stay," she said. "I'm just here f'r a few weeks, then it's back to the farm." She shrugged again. "It's nice enough though. Real fancy like, even if it is a little stuffy." She looked down on her plate. "Th' food, though...these fancy snacks ain't got a scratch on Granny Smith's fritters. An' y' gotta pick an' choose real careful like. Ah heard about some of the weird things that fancy type ponies eat--" she gave a theatrical shudder. "-- fish eggs an’ snails an’ what not-- I'd spit my bit if someone tried to make me eat anything like... what?" she paused when she noticed he was looking at her plate with an amused expression on his face.

"Um..." he raised his hoof. "I hate to say this but--" he pointed to one of the caviar-dolloped crackers on her plate. "That black stuff there? That's ... um... "

A look of horror slowly spread across her face. "What? What?"

He told her.

"Fuh...fish..." her pupils shrank to dots. She seemed to wilt where she sat; even her hair ribbon withered. She looked down on her plate of half-eaten food, swallowing. "Oh Celestia, Luna and Discord."

Toffee managed to keep a straight face. Barely. "Oh come on, it's not that bad--"

"Whu-- what about the rest of it?" Applebloom said weakly.

"Um." Toffee looked down. "Well... ahh... those little toast things, that's shrimp toast...it's a gryphon recipe..."

"Shrimp?"

"Uh, sort of like... what do they call them? Oh yes, *crawdads*. You know what crawdads are?"

"Oh Maker..."

"Hey, it's all right," he tried to reassure her. "Ponies can actually eat meat. It's an acquired taste, but--"

"That ain't the point!" Applebloom gagged. "Yore tellin' me a I ate a mashed up *mud bug??*"

"I... wouldn't put it that way..." Toffee hedged desperately. *Because I'd never be able to look at...*
shrimp toast the same way again if I did, he thought to himself.

"Oh Maker," Applebloom whimpered. "Please tell me them little yaller things is just cheese."

Toffee looked and laughed. "Yes, yes, they're just cheese." Goat cheese, but I think I shan't tell you that.

The filly seemed to regain some confidence. "And the little crackers with the gray stuff?" She pointed.

Toffee cleared his throat. "That's pate'."

"Pat-tay?" Applebloom queried.

"Pate' de foie gras," Toffee said. "....Goose liver paste." He winced.

That did it. the filly's pupils turned to pinpricks. Her face turned a spectacular shade of green. The plate went flying; she made a sound like "Hrurgh" and bolted, knocking ponies off their feet in her desperate run to find the bathroom.

She almost made it, too.

Out on the floor, Sweetiebelle was practically floating on a cloud. She was no great dancer, but Bishi was a patient dance partner. They hopped and spun around the floor, and he never took his eyes off her. For the first time in her life she felt pretty and special... like a lady. Was this what Rarity was always going on about? If it was, it was worth it.

"Are you having a good time?" Bishi asked her.

She nodded eagerly. "Oh, yes!" she said. "Only..."

"Yes?"

She gulped nervously. "The next dance -- the next slow dance -- could we have that dance, too?"

"Oh, okay," Bishi said with a shy smile. "If-if you want to, that is."

The song they were dancing to ended and, ermagersh, the next one was a slow number.(5) The lights dimmed; Bishi blushed and smiled. Sweetiebelle gulped and and smiled shakily back. They moved in closer...

Just as the most godawful sound echoed the length of the Gallery.

"BLEEEAAEEAAAARRRRRRGGGGGHHHH."

Expressions of surprise, confusion and (in one corner of the room) disgust filled the air. "Oh dear," Bishi said, looking over other ponies' heads in consternation. "I hope that poor moose is all right!"

Sweetiebelle felt the mood shatter like a champagne glass under a sledgehammer. "Oh, no..." she moaned. "Darn you, Applebloom..." She started hustling in the direction of the disturbance.

Bishi looked at her in surprise. "What makes you think that's Applebloom?"
Sweetiebelle looked over her shoulder at him. "The last time I heard that sound, she and Scootaloo had just had an ice-cream eating contest."

"Um. Who won?" Breezy Shy couldn't help asking.

"Nobody. I was sitting between 'em."

"Oh... my..."

They found Applebloom in the lobby just outside the double doors, sitting on the floor and sobbing. There was a rather nasty puddle of sick on the floor, and a circle of colts and fillies standing about rubbernecking and making exclamations of disgust and generally making a useless nuisance of themselves. One or two of the fillies had apparently been standing too close when Applebloom had her accident; their expensive looking dresses were splashed and they were screeching up a storm.

More than a few in the background were smirking at the debacle.

Sweetiebelle and Breezy were at Applebloom's side in a twinkling. Sweetiebelle helped the distraught earth filly to her feet while Breezy whipped out his kerchief and went to clean her face. "There there now," he said in his soft voice. "It'll be okay..."

"No it will not!" one of the party fillies screeched. "Look-- just look what she did to my new silk dress-- silk imported all the way from Saddle Arabia! My daddy paid a fortune for this gown and it's ruined!"

Sweetiebelle squinted narrowly at the gown in question. "Well your daddy got robbed," she said bluntly. "That isn't Arabian silk, it's cheap art silk at best. Low thread count stuff, too; my sister wouldn't even use that stuff to make sofa pillows." The fillies present gasped; the unicorn filly in question was left with her mouth hanging open, speechless at the audacity. Sweetiebelle looked closer. "And the rubies in the hem are actually garnets, by the way."

The other soiled filly, a mint green unicorn, smirked maliciously. "Well, at least one of us isn't out an expensive dress," she said. "It's always important to check credentials on your designer, ey, Ruby Drop? That's why I got a Mare Dupree original."

Sweetiebelle gave her the once over. "I wouldn't be too sure," she said. "I recognize the lace overskirt. It's an off-budget knockoff of a Mare Dupree original." The green filly's mouth shut so suddenly her jaw clicked. "also the arms are a size tight, the hems are clearly machine stitched, the pleats are uneven, the under fabric looks like toile, and the stitch count is half what Mare Dupree uses in her designs in the first place, so it's obviously a pret-au-portier number that someone sewed up a bit to make look like a Mare Dupree. Both your daddies are probably out about a hundred bits."

She paused. "Between them."

The two fillies were rapidly going from speechlessly stunned to speechlessly incandescent. The wiser ponies present were backing away; the more cutthroat ones were trying to edge closer for a better look. All of them were concealing either distress or glee, depending on where in the social ladder they were in relation to the two humiliated rich fillies.

"Um, Sweetiebelle, maybe you should go fetch somepony with a mop," Breezy Shy said guardedly. Sweetie, completely oblivious to the smouldering doom she'd ignited not three steps distant from her own tender hide, nodded and galloped off. Breezy Shy led Applebloom away from the cluster of gawking ponies. He waved down a waiter passing with a tray of drinks. "Excuse me, sir, but my friend could use a flat ginger pop for her stomach." He looked back over at the cluster of colts and fillies and the two fuming rich brats. "And, um, a round of club sodas for everypony over there, to
get the stains out," he added. The waiter nodded and trotted off.

Once the sodas were dispersed and the castle janitor was on site with a mop, Breezy sat down next to Applebloom and handed her the ginger pop. "For your tummy," he said. "And to wash the taste out of your mouth." He and Sweetie dipped napkins in club soda and began cleaning the spatter off her dress. "What happened? Do you have the flu?"

Applebloom gave him a sad watery look. "They fed me fish eggs and goose guts," she said in a quavery, broken voice.

It took a minute for Bishi to translate. "Oooh, caviar and pate'?" he said.

Applebloom nodded. "Why would Princess Luna serve fish eggs and mud bugs and goose gut paste to a bunch of ponies?"

"Um, it's an acquired taste?"

Babs found herself relatively disinterested in the dance or the buffet line at the moment. Besides, there seemed to be kind of a rumpus going on at one end of the room, so she decided to steer clear and just look around at the Gallery. She'd never been in Canterlot Castle before, so it was pretty interesting looking at the art and all the fancy architecture wingdings.

At the moment she was looking over one of the Royal Guards who were standing attention around the edges of the room. He wasn't nearly as stiff and quiet as the usual guards, shifting from hoof to hoof and idly looking about. Come to think of it, he looked really young. He was probably a rookie. No professional Royal Guard would get so fidgety just from having somepony staring at them, either.

The guard, for his part, was getting a touch bothered. The orange and red earth pony filly had been staring him up and down for five minutes solid. It was bloody unnerving. "Can I help you?" he finally asked.

"You're not a real Royal Guard, are ya," she said.

"I most certainly am!" he snapped, offended. Sure, it had been a little... irregular... but he'd been sworn in by Princess Celestia and Princess Luna, fair and square. He even had the Princesses' Bit(6) and everything. Even if he had only been one week into training.

"Then why are you wearing cadet armor? And--" she stepped closer, squinting. "--Is that gold paint?"

"Look kid, will you just go away?" the harried guard pleaded.

"Fine, fine, no need to bite my flank off," Babs said. "Sheesh." She turned to trot off. Maybe she could strike up a conversation with some of the colts and fillies all clustered against the walls. She looked around for a likely group of ponies to chat to.

What she saw next made her heart drop into her hooves. Babs' family weren't complete strangers to the upper crust; they were pretty successful zeppelin-setters(7) in Manehattan. That meant that Babs knew more than a few high society types, or at least their children.

Most of them she knew to her regret.
In this particular case, she recognized a group of colts and fillies who attended the same private school she did. They were popular, they were from wealthy families (though who wasn’t at that school?) and they did everything together. They were also the most horrible bullies in her school.

The leader of the group, a stocky earth pony colt with a blue coat, a black mane and a bit coin cutie mark, looked up and saw her. He recognized her almost immediately. The leer that spread across his face was the stuff of her worst nightmares. "Hey, everypony, look who’s here!" He said. He sounded almost jovial. "It's little Baby Babs!" Four sets of eyes turned and locked on her. They were as cold and pitiless as the eyes of a hydra.

She didn't wait for the other horseshoe to drop. She turned around and ran.

Scootaloo was trying to chat up the DJ when Sweetiebelle came running up. "What's up, Sweetie?" she asked the panting unicorn.

"Applebloom sort've had an accident," she panted. She quickly told Scootaloo the abbreviated summary of what happened.

"Yeeeurgh," Scootaloo said, sticking her tongue out. "Ponies actually eat that kind of stuff? Sick! We'd better find Babs and warn her to keep away from the buffet."

"Yeah," Sweetiebelle said. "Otherwise we'll have two ponies ralphing all over the Gala."

A hasty search revealed no sign of the Manehattan filly on the dance floor or (thankfully) at the buffet. It took several pointed questions to the staff, but they finally found Babs in the coat-check room. She was hiding behind several enormous faux-fur coats, huddled and sniffling to herself. "Hey Babs! What the heck are you doing in here?" Scootaloo demanded.

"Gettin' bucked in the teeth by karma," Babs muttered dolefully. At the other crusader's bemused looks she said, "Youse know about the bullies at my school I told you about? A whole gang of 'em are here right here at the Junior Gala. The worst of the bunch, too. PennyWorth and his stooges and their nasty filly friends. They know I'm here too."

"So you're gonna what, hide in here the whole night?" Scootaloo exclaimed in disbelief. This was so not Babs. Scootaloo could hardly believe the brash ex-bully was cowering in a coat closet like this. "Big mouthed bullies shouldn't be making you back down! Wasn't that the whole point of you becoming a Cutie Mark Crusader?"

Babs snorted disdainfully. "Are you kiddin'? The first time I went strutting around in that cape, everypony in school took one look and laughed themselves sick at it. Then they took it and my saddlebags and threw 'em up in a tree." She sniffed and rubbed her nose on her fetlock. "Me'n the other two Crusaders have to hide our capes an' stuff an' meet in secret to keep from getting picked on and beat up. " Not that hiding helped much, she reflected.

"They.. beat you up?" Sweetiebelle asked, disbelieving. Babs nodded. Pennyworth and his gang weren't wilting lilies like Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon. Babs and the other two foals got beat up, punched, pinched hard enough to leave bruises, their possessions broken and torn up pushed in the mud and more. Poor Dusky got stuffed in his locker by Pennyworth and his stooges almost every day. And thanks to Pennyworth's rotten filly friends, she and Emerald couldn't even escape the namecalling and bullying by running to the little filly's room-- if they tried, Marzipan and Ivy just followed them in and continued the torment. Pennyworth had the whole school calling them names,
"Baby Babs," "Diaper Dusky," "Little wittle Emmy...

"Don't the grownups do anything?" Sweetiebelle protested. Babs just snorted. If any of them told a grownup, nothing happened but the bullies getting their revenge, punishing them even worse. Worse, the whole school shunned them as crybabies and squealers.

Scootaloo scowled. "All right, c'mon, knock it off!" she said. Babs looked up in surprise. "You think anypony here is gonna let those plotheads pick on you? C'mon, Princess Luna is right here. And there's Princess Rainbow Dash, and Princess Applejack--- shoot, if she caught anypony picking on her cousin Princess Applejack would buck 'em to the moon!"

"Yeah, and even if she wouldn't, you've got US now," Sweetiebelle said stoutly. "You mess with one Crusader you get the whole club!"

Babs looked up at them and her eyes went watery. They really do mean it... "I'm the worst pony ever," she blubbered. "I was so mean and rotten to youse when I came to Ponyville, as bad as my bullies ever were, and now you're so nice to me--"

The two looked abashed. Scootaloo shrugged awkwardly. "Hey, you were sorry and you wanted to be better," she said. "That makes all the difference." Babs couldn't contain herself any longer. She jumped up and caught the two fillies in a fierce neck hug. "Ack! Okay, we love you too," Scootaloo said. "C'mon, let's go back out there, Applebloom had a little, uh, accident, Bishi is helping her clean up."

The three of them left the coat-check room and went back to the Gallery.

"Aww, there she is! And look-- she's got new friends!" Babs bit back a swear word and groaned. Couldn't they have waited a few minutes before showing their faces? The three fillies turned around. There stood PennyWorth and his hangers on-- a unicorn and pegasus colt who looked like they ate rocks for breakfast, and a unicorn filly with a poufy bouffant and a waspish expression on her face. There were other colts and fillies gathered round; most of the younger ones, presumably ponies without cutie marks yet, noticeably kept their distance. It looked like PennyWorth had wasted no time spreading his charm around the Gala.

Babs looked over at her friends, who were clearly sizing up the bullies and not liking what they saw. They looked a great deal less confident than they had before. "Uh.. are these the guys you were talking about?" Sweetiebelle said nervously.

"Holy horseapples, what are they feeding them?" Scootaloo said.

"Why Baby Babs," the filly said with a poisonous smile on her face. "Imagine seeing you here! Somepony let you out of your crib, I see." Her eyes glittered. "Who are your little friends? New blank flanks for your playpen?" The girls' flanks were hidden underneath their dresses, but it didn't take much to guess, obviously.

Sweetiebelle mustered everything she'd picked up from her sister. She stepped forward, tipping her nose in the air. "I am Sweetiebelle, younger sister to Princess Rarity, the alicorn of Generosity," she said in the loftiest tone she could muster.

Scootaloo picked up her cue and stepped forward as well. "And I'm Scootaloo a... uh.. apprentice to Princess Rainbow Dash, the alicorn of Loyalty," she said.

Sweetiebelle did her best to look down her nose at the earth pony bully. "And who might YOU be?" she said haughtily, her voice squeaking a bit on the 'you.'
The response was less than satisfactory. The four bullies exploded into mocking laughter. "Well, *Princess Squeakybelle*," PennyWorth said, giving her a poke with one hoof that made her squeak and stumble backwards. "I'm PennyWorth, Heir to the Worth family fortune. I'm one of the twenty richest ponies in Equestria. And I clean little lying bigmouth blank flanks like you and Baby Babs here off the bottoms of my hooves." He leaned in smirking. "C'mon, *Princess Squeakybelle*. Tell us another one."

"It's not a lie," Sweetiebelle said, deflated but trying to stand her ground.

Things naturally took a turn for the worse. Two more fillies-- the fillies Applebloom had gotten sick on-- came bustling up. The mess on their dresses had been washed out with club soda, but it looked as if the stains might set. The wet marks only made them more obvious. "Penny, Penneeeee," the green one whined. "You would not believe what some little plebe did to--" she looked over and saw Sweetiebelle standing there. "You!" she hissed.

"What is it, Ivy?" PennyWorth said, rolling his eyes.

Ruby Drop was the one to answer. "*That* little nag's friend," she said, pointing a hoof, "threw up all over our gowns! And then she told everyone here that our gowns are *cheap knockoff fakes!*" The filly seethed.

"Also true," Sweetiebelle chirped. The two bullying fillies went thermonuclear.

"She made us a laughingstock!"

"Kick her flank, Penny!" Ivy demanded.

"Hey, back off, you--" Scootaloo said, blustering. The unicorn goon shoved her back on her rump with one hoof.

Babs stepped into the gap, glowering. "Back off, PennyWorth," she said. "You try anything and you'll be in so much trouble-- I'll go straight to the Princess myself--"

Pennyworth quickly looked over his shoulder. Then turned back, smirking. "What Princess?"

Babs looked past him to where Princess Luna was standing. Was supposed to be standing. The dais was conspicuously empty of Princesses of the Night. "Oh no."

PennyWorth chuckled. "Well gee Fellas, looks like Baby Babs wants to stick up for her widdle friends. All for one and one for all, huh?" He cracked the joints in his neck. "I guess they all gotta pay the price, then."

The hulking pegasus next to him hur-hurred. "Make 'em do the Diaper Dance," he slurred.

Bab's face melted into horror. "No," she said. "You wouldn't! You can't!"

"Works for me," PennyWorth said cheerfully. "We take 'em outside and the girls make 'em do the Diaper Dance. Sound good to you, girls?" The three fillies cackled with glee. They began herding the crusaders towards a pair of Prance glass doors that opened onto the patio.

"The diaper dance?" Scootaloo asked Babs fearfully, backing up next to her. Sweetie huddled in on the other side.

"They made Dusky do it once," Babs said. "He came to school in his Crusader cape. They took it from him, made him wear it like a diaper, and then made him dance in it all the way around the
"playground." Her eyes were hellish. "He didn't come back to school the rest of the semester. He couldn't."

"I figure those cheap tacky little skirts will make good diapers for the dancing babies," Ivy cooed mockingly. "Once we tear them off the dress..."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

The bullies turned. Behind them stood Bishi. He was supporting a slightly disheveled Applebloom with one wing. The three cornered crusaders nearly collapsed in relief. "Bishi, go get a guard or somethin'!" Babs yelped. "Better yet get the princess!"

Bishi ignored her. He left Applebloom and stepped between the two groups, turning to face the bullies. "You're being very mean and very cruel," he said in his soft voice. "And you're picking on three fillies who are way smaller than you. I think you should apologize, and go away."

PennyWorth and his flunkies brayed with laughter. "And what if I don't, pretty boy?" PennyWorth mocked.

Bishi looked at the floor, tracing a circle with one hoof. "Then, um, I'll have to stop you. I guess."

PennyWorth howled. When he finally caught his breath, he said "I'd like to see you-- hey, what's this? What are those?"

While he and his hangers-on had been laughing, Bishi had kicked off his shoes and was putting on what looked like padded booties on all four hooves. "these are training shoes," Bishi explained.

"Hah. And what are those for?" PennyWorth said.

Bishi shrugged and stood up. "So I don't break your jaw when I kick you in the face." He reared up.

"Wha--"

**BAP! BIFF! BAP! BIFF! WHOP! WHOP! WHOP! BAFF! POP! BAP!**

Everypony stood slackjawed as Bishi proceeded to hoof-boot the butterscotch out of PennyWorth's head. The meek little pegasus' front hooves were a blur as he delivered what had to be a dozen lightning fast jabs to the other colt's face. For good measure he'd hop back and deliver a high kick to the chin with his back hoof every two or three punches. The arrogant bully was flailing his forehooves around, not landing a hit; he was not so much rearing up himself as he was having his forehooves lifted off the ground by the rain of hooves to his face.

Bishi finally hopped back, still standing on his back hooves in a wary stance. PennyWorth flopped to the ground, clutching his hooves to his face and squalling like a newborn foal. There was a trickle of blood from his nose and another from the corner of his rapidly swelling lip. His stooges stared at him in stunned amazement.

He finally recuperated enough to shout at them. "Get him!"

The two muscleponies started to surge forward. The pegasus suddenly grunted and folded up, falling to the floor with his eyes bugged out. He'd forgotten about Applebloom standing behind him, and the farmpony, seeing which way the wind was blowing, turned around and delivered a two-hoofed apple-buck, as her sister would have said, right where his apple tree forked.

The other one hulked forward, his horn glowing--he fared no better. Sweetiebelle was a surprisingly
fast thinker in a fight. She leapt forward and delivered the meanest dirty pool fighting trick you could use on a unicorn; she slapped the end of his horn with her hoof. There was a sound like someone twangling a ruler on the edge of a table; He went down, his magic out of commission and his eyes crossed.

The next instant Ivy had pounced on her, assumptively in defense of her coltfriend. The two unicorns went rolling across the floor, biting and kicking. Ruby Drop went in aid of their friend, only to get Scootaloo and Babs leaping on her back.

Marzipan, being the prissiest of the mares, stood there squealing uselessly for a second. When nopony went for her rather weak damsel in distress act, she started to wade into the fray herself. She found herself facing a scowling Applebloom, who was standing over the colt she'd downed. "One more step and yer spittin' teeth," the farmpony said.

Marzipan promptly folded to the floor in a faint. "Wuss," Applebloom said scornfully.

Ivy on the other hand was a vicious little minx. She had Sweetiebelle's mane in her hooves and teeth and was pulling and tearing away as if she fully intended to rip the mane right out of the smaller filly's scalp. Through tears of pain Sweetiebelle let loose a surge of magic. A swarm of sparks exploded between her and Ivy, forcing Ivy to drop her grip and roll away. The first volley was followed by a second-- a cloud of sparks that showered around Ivy's hooves, popping and snapping like Jubilee firecrackers. "Ai! Yeek! WAh!" the green unicorn yelled, hopping and dancing frantically. "You little--!

Scootaloo wasn't above a little hair-pulling herself. She was up in Ruby Drop's face, yanking at her mane and buffeting her about the head with her wings like an infuriated bantam rooster. Ruby Drop flailed about madly till she threw the pegasus filly off-- only to get a hoof square to the face from Babs. She went down and Babs went after her like Winona after a bone. Ruby Drop had always taken the lead in tormenting Babs in PennyWorth's absence, and Babs was out for her pound of flesh.

PennyWorth had actually managed to get back to his feet. His lip was already grotesquely swollen and his right eye was already swelling shut. He loomed up and went for Breezy Shy, murder in his eye. "I'm gonna rip off your wings and EAT them," he snarled through his busted lip.

Bishi made a startled squeak and decided to stop messing about. He spun about and delivered the hardest two-hoofed buck to PennyWorth's chin that he could muster. Padded hooves or no, it rang Pennyworth's bell. He staggered backward on his hind hooves, right into his two buddies who were just getting off the floor. The three of them, completely off balance, tumbled backward and fell on the end of the buffet table.

This would have been a pretty mess all by itself. As it stood, however, forces had aligned against them. The three colts in question were rather sizable for their age. Furthermore the punch bowl at this end of the table was rather larger than the one at the other end, and was also more full. Add together the general distribution of plates and serving trays down its length and, well, to be brief, the table flipped up and launched its contents....pretty much everywhere.

Thousands of bits in appetizers, bite-sized gourmet items, and exotic foodstuffs that were the painstaking effort of the royal kitchen (and one Gryphon chef who was a bit poorly versed on what canapes were appropriate for a roomful of school-age ponies) went sailing into the air and rained down on those gathered, colt, filly, guardspony, and waitstaff alike. The larger of the two punch bowls slid off the end of the table, pouring its contents over the stunned colts, half drowning them.

The other punch bowl, contrary to the laws of comedic cause and effect, did not soar across the room
to land atop somepony of importance, drenching them in a socially topical and humorous fashion, but instead arced in the opposite direction to come crashing down right on top of the sound system just as the hapless DJ leapt to safety. Sparks flew in gouts; the speakers made a sound like someone feeding an electric cat into the Cider Squeezy 6000, and all the lights in the Gallery blew out.

It was at this precise moment that Princess Luna, accompanied by none other than Discord, entered through the patio doors. The two immortals stopped and gaped, disbelieving, at the anarchy before them. All the lights were blown, some few fitfully sparking. Ponies were yelling and running back and forth, slipping and falling in the puddles of food and drink spattered across the room. The DJ stand was crackling in flame.

And before them were the CMC. Bishi was standing in a karate stance, sparring mitts on his hooves, standing watch over three badly battered foals twice his size, one of whom was still curled up lamenting his progeny. Sweetiebelle was holding another filly at hornpoint, shooting sparks at her hooves and yelling "Dance, varmint!" While Applebloom was sitting atop another and dousing her with punch, trying to wake her. Scootaloo and Babs were going the more direct route, holding a third filly face down by her mane in what was left of the punch bowl. "The Diaper Dance, huh?" Babs was screeching at the flailing filly. "Gonna make me do the Diaper Dance, huh, Ruby Drop? Well that's when I'm gonna let you back up-- when you're old enough to wear granny diapers!"

Luna was speechless. Discord not so. He clapped his mismatched hands together in glee.

"Oh Luna---And here I thought you'd forgotten my birthday!"

---

1) The highest stakes of all: the winner got all the loser's desserts for a week.

2) It's hard to maintain rigid, Royal-Guard style discipline when one of your duties is to spend Nightmare Night running about with the Princess yelling "booga booga!" at trick-or-treating foals.

3) Fourteenth in a series of over 100 excruciatingly long and insomnia-curing compositions

4) Considering he was playing CDs, this is rather extraordinary.

5) The adolescent panic in the air was palpable.

6) The pony equivalent of the King's Shilling.

7) Like jet-setters, only more slow and ponderous. We'll refrain from adding "and gassier too."

8) well... Second meanest.
Chapter 9

The Cutie Mark Crusaders and Breezy Shy found themselves in the Princesses' private chambers. They weren't sure whose, though the lunar themed decor gave them something of a hint. At the moment their attention was on other things. All nine princesses—Twilight, Rarity, Applejack, Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, Cadence, Luna and Celestia—were in the room, and most of them seemed preoccupied with yelling, fussing, and demanding explanations and answers from the foals.

The CMC couldn't be said to be feeling very cooperative. They were bruised, rumpled, splashed with food and sticky from slowly drying punch, still feeling tummy twinges from the unfortunate food, strung out from the adrenaline crash, and now all the grownups who were supposed to be on their side were shouting at them.

It was when Rarity, for the fifth time, started demanding of Sweetiebelle "What were you thinking?" that they reached the breaking point. Sweetiebelle stood on her chair and glared right in her sister's eye. "Well we'd tell you if you'd JUST STOP YELLING AT US!!" the unicorn filly bellowed.

Stunned by the sheer volume coming out of the tiny filly, the alicorns all fell silent. Cadence took advantage of her authority as an ex-babysitter and took charge of the interrogation. She cleared her throat. Good set of lungs on that one, sakes. "Very well, Sweetie Belle. Tell us what happened. From the beginning."

Sweetiebelle heaved a sigh of relief. "Thank you." With interjections and expansions of detail from the others, she told the Princesses everything, starting from Applebloom's unfortunate run-in with exotic cuisine--

"Really, Princess Luna. Fish eggs and mud bugs??" Applebloom said bitterly.

---to the moment the concussed bullies had flipped the table. "And then the sound system exploded and the lights went out, aaand that's pretty much it," Sweetiebelle concluded meekly, all her steam spent. "We're sorry, Princess Luna..."

Applejack stood there, scowling in anger. She hadn't said a word for several minutes."Is this really what happened, Applebloom?" she demanded, her voice dangerously level.

Applebloom looked up at her big sister woefully. She felt like she was withering under her sister's piercing glare. Applejack and Macintosh had given her scoldings and switchings for getting in fights before. This was worse. "It's true! We're sorry, Applejack," she said. "We're so so sorry. We didn't want to ruin your party..."

Applejack didn't say a word. She spun about and left the room, her face livid. Applebloom's chin crumpled, but she held her tears in.

For a moment, the alicorn princesses were struck speechless. "They were going to make you do what?" Rarity finally said.

"They call it the Diaper Dance," Babs said, flinching. A rather painful description of the 'punishment' was repeated.

Rarity gaped in horror, her wings flared. "Why--wh-- those horrible little hooligans!" She swept up
Sweetiebelle in her wings... and backed away a moment later with her muzzle scrunched in distaste. "Euh, you are simply covered in punch and muck, Sweetie," she said. "here--" a tub of wet-naps floated into the room and Rarity began cleaning her squirming sister's face and and hooves off. Cadence helped chip in; between the two and their telekinesis they had wet-naps assaulting all five of them. "You poor dears, what a wretched thing to have happen..."

"But still... fighting..." Fluttershy shook her head sadly at Bishi. Bishi ducked his head and looked away.

"Yeah," Rainbow Dash said reluctantly. "I mean, jeez, Scootaloo... getting in a brawl with a buncha colts in the middle of a fancy ball. What am I supposed to say to your folks?" she leaned over when she thought the others' attention was away. "Didja knock him out?" she muttered.

"Dash...!" Fluttershy exclaimed.

"Well hey--"

"Lemme put it this way: what has two green eyes and one black one?" Scootaloo smirked.

"Scootaloo..." Fluttershy said, almost pleading.

"Fluttershy, what ever is the matter with you?" Rarity said, still cradling her little sister in her wings. "Those little monsters assaulted your little brother and our little sisters! Didn't you hear what they were going to do to them if they hadn't fought back?"

"But they should have gone to a grownup and let them handle it," Fluttershy protested.

"Oh yeah, like that ever works," Twilight Sparkle snorted cynically. At the other princesses' surprised looks, she said, "Come on. Why do you think I was so terrified of going back to Magic Kindergarten?" She shook her head. "The Diaper Dance, huh? They still call it that...?"

Princess Celestia looked absolutely stricken as she realized the implications of what her former pupil was saying. She set her teacup down and started to get to her feet. "Oh, Twilight..."

Cadence moved in from the other side and nuzzled her former charge consolingly. "I'm so sorry, Twily. I never had any idea--"

Twilight waved her off with a wing. "It was long ago," she said dismissively. "Before I was even Celestia's pupil. I'm over it now. Really. No, really." She was careful not to look anypony in the eye. "Anyway, what I was saying... even when I was a filly, 'telling the grownups' never works. "Teachers don't have time for tattletales," Miss Gaskin always said. And even when they did do something it's always just a slap on the fetlock, and it just earns you some petty act of revenge, oh, another swirly or your bookbags in a tree or... the Diaper Dance," she finished, one eyelid twitching. "I'm over it, really--" Cadence just nodded and threw a wing over Twilight's shoulder.

"Yeah, what she said," Babs said. "Doesn't anypony realize that if that 'tell a grownup' stuff really worked, there'd be no bullies in the first place?" she slapped her forehooves on her seat cushion in frustration. "Bullies aren't stupid. They wait until there are no grownups around. Or till no grownups are looking. Or till no grownups are around who care. And they know how to deal with squealers." She looked ashamed. "How d'ya think I got away with bullying Applebloom right under Cousin Applejack's nose?"

"You seem to regret that now, at least," Celestia noted as an aside. "Why did you even do it in the first place?"
It was surprising how such a tough little pony could look so forlorn. Babs shrugged. "'Cause why not? They were so nice and eager to see me, I thought the girls were setting me up--tricking me. It scared me. Then Diamond Tiara and Silver Spoon showed up and everything was back to normal. Kids were getting bullied and nopony was doing anything about it. Except this time I was on the winning side for once."

The mares in the room all looked at one another. *Everything was back to normal.* what an indictment of the way things were.

"We didn't start anything," Applebloom insisted unhappily. "They ganged up on us!"

Luna spread her wings for attention. "Enough, sisters," she said. "It is apparent the foals here were not to blame."

"Going by their version of events, yes," Celestia said tactfully.

Luna's eyebrows tabled. "Fair enough... suffice it that the Princess of Honesty believed them."

"No she didn't," Applebloom whimpered. "Not a word."

Celestia cocked an eyebrow. "What makes you say that?" she said, taking a sip from her teacup.

"Ah know that look in her eye. It's her 'Ah'm gonna go find out the truth' look," Applebloom said bitterly, making quote marks in the air with her hooves. "She gits it whenever she thinks I'm lying. Why can't she ever believe me?"

Celestia looked at her sympathetically. "She does, my little pony," she said.

"How would you know?" Applebloom said a trifle belligerently, wiping her eye on her foreleg.

Up to this point Pinkie had remained quiet. "Silly filly," she piped up. "Have you ever known Applejack to not call a liar-pants a liar-pants?" Applebloom shook her head. "Well there you go, silly!"

""If she did not believe you," Cadence said matter-of-factly, "then wouldn't she have said so?"

---

Applejack marched through the hallways of Castle Canterlot, snorting. She made no hesitation, swerving neither to the right nor the left, taking each intersection with confidence and determination as if her horn were leading the way.

In a manner of speaking, it was. Applejack was the Element of Honesty. More importantly she was the alicorn of Honesty. Truth was her Element in the way that water was to a fish and her relationship to that Element had only grown with her ascendance. She could follow the currents of fact and truth and information like a bloodhound, in a way that would make Sherlock Holmes rapturous or any hardboiled gumshoe weep with envy. A huge, awful story had been plunked down in front of her just now, and her Element wouldn't let her rest till she saw the whole of it. That was no problem, for she could sniff out the other huge chunk of the story like she was sniffing out the rest of a wheel of stinky cheese.

Meanwhile, in the Canterlot infirmary, PennyWorth and his friends were all nursing their wounds and their grievances. Marzipan was bewailing her fate, despite being the least injured of the group (she had landed on her hairdo wrong. (1)) Ivy was wincing and cursing as the longsuffering nurse
dabbed ointment on her cuts and scrapes and on the bald spots on her mane. Ruby Drop was still sneezing up fruit punch. PennyWorth's two testosterone laden goons were the worse for the wear as well; the pegasus was groaning and clutching an ice bag someplace unpleasant while his unicorn friend lay back and waited for the world to stop spinning.

PennyWorth himself was pretty badly off. Unicorn magic had reduced most of the swelling in his lip and eyes and cheeks and nose and-- well, let it suffice that it was only thanks to the nurses that he didn't look like a cross between a prize fighter and a potato. He was clutching an ice pack to half his face and seething, plotting their revenge. "Baby Babs has had it!" he snarled. "She's gotta come back to school someday, and the minute she does we're gonna make her life h**l**. Her and her friends--"

"Da ones already dere, or da ones at da dance?" the pegasus thug managed to groan.

"Both, you plothead!" PennyWorth snapped. He paused and gave a curt laugh. "I got friends and money, I can find a way to make their lives miserable even if they lived north of the Crystal Empire."

He sneered as best he could with a busted lip. "Little twerps, trying to pass themselves off as related to nobility. Man, even that little redhaired corn pone tried to pull that. "Ah'm gonna tell my sister Princess Applejack," he mimicked. His sycophants all laughed. "I'm gonna have fun coming up with a way to put her in her--"

He was too busy gloating over his planned revenge to notice that his compatriots had all fallen silent with looks of dread on their faces. He got the message a moment later when an orange hoof planted itself on the gurney he was riding and spun it around, leaving him facing somepony very large, royal, and angry looking.

Applejack had been an earth pony a long time; it was only natural that her magic first and foremost worked through the earth. Her ire spread out through her hooves and into the stone floor. There was a loud rumble; the entire castle trembled, briefly. "Me an' the other Princesses understand you have a little problem with our kinfolk," she said ominously. "Rarity's little sister Sweetiebelle? Fluttershy's baby brother Breezy? My little sister Applebloom? Our cousin Babs?"

She edged forward till she was almost nose to nose with the spoiled colt. "Care ta explain yourselves?"

PennyWorth sat there, frozen, his jaw hanging loose. All that came out of his mouth was a strangled, high pitched "eeeeeeeeeee." It was the squee of the damned.

---

Celestia sighed and set aside her cup. "Please understand, children, we do not blame you for what happened. Once all of us calm down and think this over--" here she shot a look at Fluttershy, who stuck out her lip in an uncharacteristic gesture of defiance-- "I'm sure we'll agree. But there are going to be consequences."

"Consequences?" Scootaloo said apprehensively.

Luna rolled her eyes. "The families of the foals whose flanks thou most righteously kicked--"

"Luna--"

"Well, they did-- ahem. Their families are wealthy, powerful and influential. They are already causing a ruckus over what happened which shall only grow louder o'er the coming weeks, both in the royal court and in the press." Luna looked sympathetic. "They are a petty lot, like their foals, and they will strive to make trouble for thy families-- to take petty vengeance-- if we go about as if
nought had happened."

"So you're gonna haveta punish us, t' keep them from causin' trouble," Applebloom said unhappily.

The other princesses were about to raise a fuss when Celestia interjected. She smacked one hoof on her velvet cushion. "Certainly not!" she said, miffed. "I won't hear of it. But we will have to... put you someplace away from their immediate attention. The advantage of dealing with petty individuals is that they are petty in every way; they will forget the incident soon enough if given the chance."

"We gotta lay low till da heat's off," Babs translated.

"Youse gots it," Celestia shot back, giving the Manehattan filly a wink. Babs giggled.

"Well, I suppose that it all works out with the plan I had," Twilight said. The foals looked curious as the princesses nodded to each other.

"Indeed, Twilight," Rarity said. "It just gives us another excuse to go through with it."

"What plan?" Scootaloo asked.

At that moment Applejack reentered the room. She had the air of somepony who had confirmed something to her unhappy satisfaction. "Well?" Pinkie Pie asked.

Applejack blew a tuft of her mane out of her face. "Yup," she said. "Just like we was told. Little weasels tried ta tell me they were 'just jokin' around'. When that didn't work they tried to say that this lot jumped 'em." She grimaced in disgust. "They might as well had 'LIAR' lit up on their flanks in neon." She snorted.

"Hey, we're not that puny," Scootaloo muttered.

"Anyway, story confirmed," Applejack concluded.

"You coulda just believed us," Applebloom muttered, pouting. Applejack winced a little.

"Annnnnyway," Twilight said. "I think we were all concluding that this might be a good reason to go ahead with that little plan we spoke about earlier?"

Applejack seemed to think a minute then nodded. "Yep. All things considered it might be for the best."

"Okay, what plan?" Sweetiebelle said.

Rarity tsked. "You see dear, as you know, the girls and I are going to be going on an... extended trip," she said.

"Huntin' for other alicorns," Applejack said.

"...And well, we've been concerned about leaving you three... er, well, four, er, five now... all alone."

"Up to your own devices," Twilight said dryly. "Running amuck in Ponyville without any-- oof!" she rubbed her side where Applejack had elbowed her.

"And now with current events... oh I'll just cut to the chase, dears," Rarity said. "You're going with us."
The foals looked up in surprise. "You mean it?" Sweetiebelle asked, excitement and hope bubbling up. All she'd been looking forward to at this point was going back home after the coronation.

Twilight nodded, smiling in spite of herself. "Yes, you'll each be going with your sisters," she said. At this Sweetie, Applebloom and Bishi brightened considerably.

Scootaloo and Babs deflated a little. "Oh, um. Well... have fun, I guess," Scootaloo said.

Babs grinned awkwardly and scratched the back of her head. "Yeah... write me, Applebloom?"

"Now hold on a minute," Rainbow Dash said with a cocky grin. "Don'tcha think honorary sisters count?" She threw a wing over Scootaloo's shoulders. "No way I'm leaving my number one fan behind. Already talked to your folks-- they gave it the go."

Scootaloo's face could have lit up a lighthouse. "Really??"

"Absotively posilutely," Rainbow Dash said. Scootaloo squealed with glee.

"Ayep," Applejack said. "And I don't think I could get away with leavin' Applebloom's favorite cousin behind either. We'll make enough room for ya, Babs." She scowled briefly. "Sides, I don't think I wanna be sending you back to Manehattan so long as those uppity brats have their dander up," she muttered.

"This is awesome!" Sweetiebelle squealed. "We're all gonna tour Equestria together!!" The four fillies leapt at each other in a group hug, jumping up and down and squealing. Breezy Shy, to his mortification, got caught up in the melee as well.

"Girls.. GIRLS!" Twilight shouted for their attention. They stopped hopping up and down. "Not... not exactly together, I'm afraid." The CMC started looking apprehensive. "You see, we're all going in different directions," the purple alicorn said, sharing a look with her friends. "We have to, to cover more ground. We're going to be gone at least a year as it is. So no... you all won't be traveling together."

The girls all sat down on the floor with a thump. "We're not??" Applebloom said. "We're... splitting up??"

"For a whole year?" Sweetie said in dismay.

"Oh, not the whole time," Twilight said, lowering her head to them and smiling. She flicked her horn and a map of the world appeared next to her. It was covered with multicolored lines and dots and circles. "We're all going to be flying different itineraries, but we'll be stopping, oh, every couple of weeks or so to meet up together. see?" She traced the routes on the map with her hoof. "Besides, think of all the things you'll have to talk about whenever we get back together!"

"Um, yeah, I guess so," Scootaloo said. "But still..." she gnawed at her lip.

Twilight chuckled. "Don't worry, I have a few other things that will make it not so bad," she said. "But for right now, why don't you take a little while, talk it over with your sisters. And your honorary sisters. And cousins. Whatever." She waved a wing.

"Yeah, c'mon kid," Rainbow Dash said, leading Scootaloo to the door. "Lemme fill you in on all the details." The foals and princesses paired off and filed out of the room. As soon as the door closed behind them, Twilight Sparkle sagged in relief.

"Whew!" she said to Celestia and Luna. "I was afraid that was going to be a much harder sell."
"Tis fortunate that the young ones are more or less enthusiastic," Luna agreed. "Methinks they will be, ah, 'all on board' once they know all the details."

"Well I didn't want to look like I was bribing them," Twilight said. "I'd rather they choose to go along because they want to be with their families, not because I stacked up more goodies for them."

"As if a free world tour with six princesses wasn't a bribe in and of itself," Celestia said drolly.

"Yeah, that's a pretty high pile of icing on the cupcake, there, Twi," Pinkie Pie added with a giggle. "I can't wait for all the fun adventures I'll have with MY travel buddy!"

Twilight cocked an eyebrow. "Pinkie, the foals are all going with their families, and 'honorary sister'," she said. "Who are you going with?"

"Nawwwwwwt telling," the pink party alicorn giggled. "Not until eveypony comes back. I want it to be a surprise!"

Rainbow led Scootaloo back to her suite. "Sit here, kiddo, I gotta go change out of this monkey suit," she said, ducking behind a privacy screen. "So whaddya think, huh? Pretty exciting, right?" she called out behind the screen.

"Yeah!" Scootaloo agreed. Then she rethought it. "Well..."

"Oh, do I hear hesitation?" Rainbow Dash teased. A garter came flying over the screen, followed by a stocking.

"Well..." Scootaloo looked for the words. "I mean, there's the whole one year away from each other thing--"

"Pfft. That? Don't worry about that," Dash said. The ball gown came over the screen to land in a heap on the floor. "Jeez, there's more layers to this outfit than a wedding cake--- what was I saying? Oh yeah, don't worry about that. Twilight's got that all figured out. Ol' Egghead's come up with for all of us to stay in touch."

"What, dragonfire messages?" Scootaloo guessed.

"Hah! Nah, something way cooler than that," Dash said. "Trust me, you're gonna love it. Grr. Argh!" There was a ripping noise followed by a twang. "Whoo." A somewhat savaged elastic girdle sailed over the screen to join the rest of the discarded clothes. "Never let anypony talk you into wearing one of those things, kid."

"Aren't you disappointed?" Scootaloo asked.

"Come again?"

"Well, you were gonna be a Wonderbolt. And an awesome one," Scootaloo said. "Now you're gonna be a Princess and just sit on a throne all day and stuff..." the disappointment was thick in her own voice.

Dash's head appeared. "Hah! You're gonna love this, kid! I got somethin' better." She disappeared again.

"Better than being a Wonderbolt?" Scootaloo said cynically.
"Check it out. Okay, you know that we're hunting for more alicorns, right?"

"Yeah?"

"Well. we're kinda doin' it undercover." Scootaloo 'ooohed' in approval. "Yeah. Already twenty percent cooler. So get this, my cover is that I'm gonna be traveling around doing fundraisers... for hospitals and schools and orphans and stuff like that. Right?"

"Okay..." Fundraising didn't sound all that cool to Scootaloo. It painted a picture of ponies giving boring speeches and selling tickets and stuff.

"Well check out the fundraiser program." A rolled-up poster came sailing over the screen, hitting the filly in the nose. She picked it up and unrolled it... and nearly had a heart attack. WONDERBOLTS CHARITY AIRSHOW, the lettering shouted. "You're touring with the Wonderbolts?" she shrieked.

"I'm headlining with the Wonderbolts," Dash said. "I'm gonna be in the show."

"See it's like this," Dash explained. "Princess Celestia and Princess Luna say that since I'm a Princess now, I gotta have some hardcore bad dude ponies to be my personal Guard. And what other bunch of hardcore bad dude ponies would even be able to keep up with me but the Wonderbolts? The show is their cover too."

Scootaloo started to hyperventilate. "But wait," she said. "I thought you-- you couldn't because--"

"Because I'm so awesome now that I'd fly their wings off?" Dash chuckled. "Yeah, that's right. So I'm not flying with them. I'm gonna be flying solo, as the show opener.

"The story's gonna be that I'm the new top level... we're gonna be looking for fliers so awesome that they can keep up with an alicorn princess to fill out the new super top slot. I figure we put out the challenge like that, anyone with some alicorn blood in their veins will come out of the woodwork just to try out." Dash stepped out from behind the curtain. "Course I'm gonna need somepony to be my assistant-- fetch towels and water, help me train, sort my fan mail, that sorta thing..."

"Me?" Scootaloo squeaked.

"You got it." Dash stepped out in the middle of the floor. She was dressed in a Wonderbolts leotard... no, not quite. Instead of the blue-and-yellow lightning unitard of the Wonderbolts, hers was midnight blue and golden flame. Her face was exposed like in the cadet uniforms, with a headband going just under her horn and a high collar that came up to her cheeks. The head was metallic gold, as were the boots up to the knee on all four legs, and split into golden flames and sparkles that trailed down her shoulders and back, fading to red and indigo. Around her neck was the gold torc of the Element of Loyalty; it blended perfectly with the metallic gold cloth around her face and off her shoulders. She struck a pose.

"Well, kid-- say hello to the world's first FIREBOLT!"

Scootaloo squeed and toppled out of her chair.

Fluttershy sat and looked at her baby brother.
Breezy Shy sat and looked at his big sister.

For a wonder, Fluttershy was the first to break eye contact. She sighed and lowered her eyes. "Bishi," she said. "I know you meant well. And you thought you were doing the right thing..."

"I was doing the right thing," Bishi said. He looked down and rubbed one hoof over the other. "I wish you could see that."

"But," Fluttershy pleaded, "Couldn't you have tried something other than fighting...?"

Now it was Breezy Shy's turn to stand up. "No we couldn't!" he said, scowling angrily at his sister. He immediately flushed and withdrew a little from his defiant stance, but he stood his ground. He pulled his training booties out of his jacket and dropped them at Fluttershy's feet. "Why did you and Mother get these for me, then?" he demanded. "Why did you pay for my martial arts lessons?"

"Not for this!" Fluttershy said angrily, glaring and dangerously close to using the Stare.

Bishi was unphased. "Yes it was," he said softly, stamping his hoof. "I asked Sensei why I had to take the lessons. Sensei told me 'because sometimes there are bad ponies who aren't going to stop because you give them a stern talking to.'" His big blue eyes were tender and remorseless. "They were bad ponies, and they were going to do awful things to my friends. Awful things. I protected them. Wouldn't you do the same?"


"Why?" Breezy asked.

Fluttershy's face crumpled. "Because I know you're just trying to stand up for yourself. I know that you're so much like I am. And I could be an awful pony if I let myself." Her memory flashed back to her first Grand Galloping Gala, to the dragon migration, to Iron Will... "I tried to be assertive too, once. And I hated what I became. I became an awful pony who hurt other ponies and who hurt her friends and who drove everypony away and I don't want that to happen to..." her voice ended in a tearful squeak.

Bishi rested one hoof on her shoulder. "But you didn't stay that way did you?" he asked.

Fluttershy smiled and sniffled, shaking her head no. Bishi smiled. "There, you see? You learned better. I learned better too. Sensei made sure of it. He always tells us 'You don't have to step on somepony else to stand up for yourself.' It sounds like you learned that too. And if you could learn that, I could learn that. I promise, sister, I'll never ever step on somepony else."

Fluttershy pulled her not-so-little brother into a warm hug, wings and forelegs. "When did my baby brother get so all grown up?" She said. "I've missed so much that's happened with you since I left Cloudsdale."

Bishi grinned. "I guess it's good that we're going to spend some time together now, huh?"

Babs and Applebloom trotted into Applejack's suite, Applejack right behind them. Applebloom was still nursing a bit of a pout. Couldn't Applejack have believed her, just this one---

The door had barely closed behind Applejack before she swept forward, sweeping the two fillies into
a hug, startling them both. "I'm so sorry, you two," she said. "What happened to you was downright awful. I'm sorry I yelled at you. I'm sorry I made you feel guilty when you didn't do nuthin' wrong..."

Applebloom squirmed a little. She didn't want to feel better yet. "Then why didn't you believe us?" she said. "Why'd you go runnin' off to get some other pony to tell you, like you couldn't..." like you couldn't trust me, went unsaid.

Applejack groaned and let them go. "I was afraid o' that," she said. She sighed and settled down on the floor next to the two fillies. "Applebloom, you gotta understand somethin'." Applejack ruminated over what to say next. "You know I'm an element of Harmony, right?"

Applebloom looked a bit offended. "Well duh."

"And what element am I?"

"The element of Honesty, DUH."

"Well I'm more than that. I'm also the alicorn of Honesty."

Both fillies cocked their heads in puzzlement. "So how's that different?" Babs said.

"It means that I don't just wear the element anymore," Applejack said, tapping the apple gem on her torc. "It means that Honesty is a part of me now, part of my magic. It's like wearin' the Element all the time, on the inside. And, well, it means I gotta do things a certain way. Like... like a bird's gotta fly because it has wings. Or a fish has to swim because it has fins. Like an itch you just gotta scratch. If I don't, my Element bugs the fire out of me till I do.

"Y'see, girls, another word for Honesty is Truth. An' a part of Truth is Facts. And to get the Facts, you gotta Get the Whole Story." Applebloom and Babs could hear the capital letters in the words. "When you all told me what happened, I knew right away you weren't lyin', my Element told me that right away. But I also knew I hadn't heard the whole story."

"But I told you everything--" Applebloom protested.

"You told me everything you all knew," Applejack corrected. "But just what you knew, from your perspective. From your side. And Y' cain't see the backside of the barn from the front. My Element wouldn't let up buggin' me till I'd got all the sides of the story. Even if none of 'em told me nuthin' new. I had to go hear them bullies' stories-- lies an' all-- just to be fair. Because honesty is about bein' fair, too-- to everypony. Even the ponies that don't deserve it."

"If I go askin' questions after y'all, it don't mean I don't trust you anymore, darlin'," she said, running a hoof over Applebloom's mane. "It just means I gotta do what I gotta do. Understand?"

Applebloom nodded and threw her forelimbs around her sister's neck. All was forgiven, just that easy. It was hard to keep two Apples apart. Applejack chuckled and pulled Babs in for a hug as well. "C'mere, you. All that goes for you too, little cousin."

Applebloom and Babs let go after a minute and sat back. "So we're really gonna do dis?" Babs asked.

"Ayup." Applejack grinned. "You two an' me, roamin' the countryside beatin' the bushes for more alicorns. Us and a few other ponies too, o' course."

"But what about the farm?" Applebloom asked, suddenly worried.
Applejack gave a hoot of laughter. "That's all taken care of," she said. "The princess--- Uh, Princess Celestia, that is-- picked out some farm workers to go to Sweet Apple Acres and lend a hoof. She's even sendin' some house servants and... um.. a whaddyacallum, a physical there-summeruther..."

"A physical therapist?" Babs said.

"That's the jasper. A physical therapist to look after Granny, give her hoof-rubs and what not." Applejack chuckled. "Best birthday present ever, I bet."

"Oh, brings me to mind--" Applejack flicked her horn; it glowed fitfully, and something wrapped in an amber aura came floating across the room. "Durn, I need more practice," she grunted, as it flopped to the ground at her hooves. "Babs, I hope y'don't mind, but this li'l memento is somethin' I want to keep in the immediate family." Babs shook her head. "Alright then. Applebloom, your grandpaw passed this down to your paw. Your paw wanted to pass it down to Macintosh, but Big Mac already had paw's horsecollar, so he passed it over to me. And now I'm passin' it down to you."

With that ceremony she plopped her horsecollar down on Applebloom's head. It promptly sank down over the filly's ears, engulfing her head.

Applebloom struggled to push the horsecollar up while Babs giggled fit to bust. "But why?" Applebloom asked.

Applejack smiled wistfully. "Cause I'm a princess now, Applebloom," she said. "All this... these wings, this horn, this journey... they're just the start of all the changes I'm gonna have to go through. I can't just be a farmpony no more; I gotta be a proper princess now, and a proper princess don't wear no cowpony hat."

Applebloom promptly took the hat off and glared at her. "Horseapples."

"Applebloom!" her sister said, shocked. "Such language!"

"And if you say that again, I'll say it again," Applebloom said emphatically. She got up on her back hooves, hat in her forehooves, and reached up to set it on Applejack's head. "You're a princess now, aintcha?" she said as she pushed the hat back in place.

"Yes! That's what I'm tryin'--"

"And that means you get to decide what bein' a proper princess IS," Applebloom said firmly. "Not nopony else. You kin walk around with flapjacks on your head and an apple stuck on your horn and nopony can say boo to ya."

"Well I wouldn't go that far," Babs giggled.

Applebloom gave the hat a final poke. "There." She sat down and put her hoof to her sister's nose. "And don't you dare let nopony tell you to be anypony but yourself, y'hear?"

Applejack chuckled and pulled her sister in for another hug. "Don't you ever change neither, sweet pea," she said. So young, so confident and so alive... I am not going to bury my little sister, Applejack swore. She's going to see as many years as I do and more, I swear it. Alicorns, you better be ready!

"I can't believe we're really going to do this," Sweetiebelle said, hopping almost like Pinkie Pie. "I'm so excited I could burst!"
Rarity laughed. "Well try not to, dear, we don't want to make a mess," she teased. She smiled to herself in amusement. Then her smile faltered. "Sweetiebelle..."

"Yah huh?" Sweetie said, still hopping about.

Doubt crept into Rarity's voice. "Sweetiebelle... are you sure that you want to do this? Travel-- with me?"

Sweetiebelle stopped in her tracks. "Sure I do!" she said confidently. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Because...all the things you'd miss," Rarity said. "And there's all that travel, and you know how your tummy gets on long trips, and..." and because I will be busier than ever before--- and I neglect you when I'm preoccupied. I can be an insufferable big sister sometimes... could you really bear being stuck with me for such a long time? She thought with a terrible pang of guilt.

Sweetie promptly picked up the wrong hint. Her face fell. "You... you do want me to come along, don't you?" Her ears drooped and her eyes got watery. "...You don't, do you. I know I'm a pain..."

"Oh no no no," Rarity said, turning around and nuzzling her. "Don't ever think that, Sweetiebelle. It's just..." she sighed. "Let's be honest, dear. We really can get on each other's nerves."

"Well yeah," Sweetie said unhappily. "But how is staying away from each other gonna make that any better?"

"Touche'," Rarity said.

"Gesundheit."

Rarity stifled a snicker. "Okay, so maybe it wouldn't hurt spend some time learning to get along," she said. "But are you sure? I mean, you'll get awfully homesick. Heaven knows I'm getting homesick and we haven't even left. Won't you miss Mother and Father?"

Sweetiebelle's eyebrows tabled. "Come on, Rarity," she said. "You know Mom and Dad would be off on another trip sometime soon, and I'd just end up being babysat by somepony. And then I'd just be sitting there all alone in Ponyville missing everybody." 

Rarity grimaced. She really needed to take her parents to task about all their little trips. Would it kill them to take Sweetie with them once or twice? "We really don't come from ideal circumstances, do we, dear," she said.

Sweetiebelle shrugged. "Probably not."

"If you're really really certain you want to come on this voyage with me..." Rarity said.

"I'm really really really REALLY certain," Sweetiebelle said firmly.

"Then it's settled." Rarity sauntered over to her wardrobe to change out of her ball gown. Magic made it the work of a few moments. "Uff, heavens. As fabulous as it is, this thing is simply smothering. I must look into more breathable fabrics." She donned a robe and sat down at her vanity to touch up her makeup a bit. "Well now there is one thing you might miss out on at Ponyville," she said, teasing a bit. "Meeting a nice colt. Won't that nice boy, what was his name, Button, miss you?"

"Rariteeee..." Sweetiebelle rolled her eyes. "Button's just a friend--"

Rarity tittered. "That's what they all say, dear."
"Besides, I've met a nice boy here," Sweetie continued. Rarity could see her blush in the mirror. "Bishi."

"Oh. Well." Rarity thought carefully about how to approach this. "I did notice that the other girls seemed rather... fond... of Breezy Shy too. You might want to be careful that he doesn't come between you four."

"Why would he?" Sweetiebelle said, curious.

"Well dear, when two... or more... fillies like the same colt, they tend to fight over him. That does tend to break up a friendship." Rarity carefully applied a touch of lipstick.

Sweetiebelle shrugged. "We could share him," she said.

Rarity's lipstick promptly graphed a jagged line from her lower lip to her left ear. "Wha--?" She turned and stared at her sister, her carefully groomed eyebrows nearly flying off the top of her head. It took a moment to recuperate. "--Oh very funny, Sweetiebelle," she said. "Now stop being silly--"

"Who's being silly?" Sweetiebelle said. "Lotsa ponies used to have herds."

"That was a long time ago, Sweetie," Rarity said, blinking rapidly.

"Nuh uh," Sweetiebelle said. "Miss Cheerilee says that half the married ponies in Equestria were in herds just fifty years ago."

Rarity sputtered. "Oh balderdash! Besides it's... it's against the law today."

"Nuh uh," Sweetiebelle said. "I asked. It's perfectly fine and legal for a stallion to marry more than one mare, if he so wishes," she recited.

"Who told you that nonsense?"

"...Princess Celestia."

Rarity felt the conversation getting away from her rapidly. "Well that was then and this is now," she said, desperately trying to round up things before they went over the cliff. "We're more civilized these days--"

Sweetiebelle scowled at this. "But there are still lots of ponies who marry in herds, even in Equestria..." she said. "Mom and Dad talk all the time about their friends out in Magic Valley and Salt Lick City. And there's Saddle Arabia...Shoot, even the Zebras--"

"You're not a Zebra!" Rarity half shrieked.

There was a long pause. "Are you saying there's something wrong with marrying a Zebra?" Sweetiebelle said dangerously. "My penpal Jorge is half zebra, and he--"

"No, I'm not saying-- ARGH!" Rarity buried her face in her hooves. What had her half-mad parents been dropping in her little sister's ear?

She felt a tiny hoof on her shoulder. "You really do need this trip, Rarity," Sweetiebelle said soberly. "Travel really broadens your perspective."

Rarity groaned.

"Um, you got some lipstick on your cheek, right there..."
There had been a plethora of fancy and rather pointy combs hidden in her bouffant.
Chapter 10

It was an hour or so later that they all met in Twilight's suite. "So everypony is on board?" Twilight beamed. A round of nods answered her. "Excellent!" Twilight clapped her hooves together. "Let me fill you in on the arrangements I've already made... Spike?"

Spike came tottering over sleepily from one corner, carrying several scrolls in his arms and balancing a box on his head. "Boy, you guys party late," he muttered, handing the papers and box over to Twilight's magical aura. "If you need me, I'll be in my bed." He yawned again and staggered off.

"Good. Well," Twilight said, magically sorting the papers. "As you already know, we're going to be heading out on a "goodwill tour" that also happens to be a methodical search for more alicorns, nascent or otherwise."

"Nascent?" Scootaloo asked.

"Not ascended yet," Sweetiebelle provided.

"Oh."

"Of course the first problem this brought up was, well, that we'd all be separated, almost the entire time," Twilight said. "And magic scrolls are handy, but kind of time consuming. So I came up with this." She opened the box with a magical flourish. Out floated six circular flat discs....

"Compacts?" Rarity said, bemused as one floated into her hoof.

"Not exactly," Twilight said. "open them up." The girls complied. The cases were shiny metal with ornate runic engravings. Inside was a flat, round mirror, like anypony would expect to find in a compact. Except the mirror--

"Hey, I can see you guys!" Pinkie squealed. It was true: instead of their own reflections, each alicorn saw five small animated faces-- their friends-- staring out at them.

"They're magic mirrors," Twilight said proudly. "They'll let us see each other anywhere we are. And--" she held the compact up to her mouth.

"They'll let us speak to each other, too," the other five compacts said in her voice. The girls all yelped, nearly dropping them. Twilight giggled. "Now we can hold a conversation together whenever we want," she said.

"But what if you just want to speak to one pony?" Rarity said.

"That's easy," Twilight said. "Close them for a minute, would you?" She cleared her throat. "Ahem. 'Applejack.'"

*Glingle ingle ingle.* Applejack looked down at hers; it was trilling like a cricket with bells on its legs and one of the gems on it was blinking. "Heh, ain't that clever," she said. She picked it up and opened it. Twilight's face greeted her. Meanwhile her face, blinking in surprise, appeared in Twilight's compact. "You can talk to up to five ponies with mirrors at a time," Twilight said. "Just say their names, or say 'everypony,' and all our mirrors will chime. And look--" she held her compact up and waved it around. The image in Applejack's compact swooped around in the same way,
showing everything the mirror faced. "We can show each other whatever we're looking at."

"Cool beans," Rainbow Dash said. "I can see how this'll come in handy."

"Oh, I almost forgot." Five more compacts floated up out of the box, landing in five eager little hooves. "Since they're coming with us, I made a set for the girls and Bishi. Spike already has his own." She smiled. "I figured they'd like a way to keep in touch, too."

"Oh wow-- so awesome-- neat!" The fillies and colt immediately began fiddling with their new toys.

Applejack looked a little worried. "Are you sure, Twi? Those things look a mite expensive and--"

"Eep!" Applebloom fumbled as the slick case slipped out of her hooves. It flipped over in the air and landed with a sickening "crack" on the stone floor--- naturally, just an inch past the edge of the thick plush throw rug.

"Breakable," Applejack finished weakly.

Twilight levitated the compact back into Applebloom's hooves. The filly nervously flipped it open again. She and Applejack sighed in relief as the unbroken mirror lit up again. "Solid oricalcum case, and moonsilver plate behind sapphire glass," Twilight said, a trifle smugly. "You could whack these babies with a sledgehammer and they'd still work. They're made along the same lines as the full size mirrors in the meeting room on each of our zeppelins--"

"Zeppelins?" Scootaloo said in surprise.

"Heh. You didn't think we were gonna strap everything to our backs and fly everywhere ourselves, didja?" Dash teased, giving the orange pegasus filly a noogie.

"Other than certain basic amenities, though, all the ships are currently unfurnished and undecorated," Twilight added. "I figured you'd each prefer to decorate yours to suit yourselves."


"Princess Celestia and Princess Luna already picked out the crew and staff," Twilight went on. "There will be a tutor on each ship for Bishi and the girls, so they don't fall behind in school while we're gone."

"Well there goes paradise," Scootaloo said sarcastically. Everyone laughed.

"Don't feel too bad, squirt," Rainbow Dash said wryly. "She's sending along a magic tutor for each of us, too. And somepony to teach us all the fancy princessy-type stuff, too. Looks like you and me are gonna be studdy buddies."

Celestia chuckled. "Don't be too downhearted," she said to the foals. "I think you'll find that having a private tutor suits you. Oh," she added. "Beyond the staff that's been appointed, there's room enough in your payroll to bring along two or three others... any experts or professionals you think might be of assistance in the search." The Elements all nodded seriously, each of them thinking carefully over what sort of help they might bring or need.

"Speaking of which," Twilight said. "Celestia just taught me a new spell that I want to teach all of you now. Could you all, erm, sort of bring your horn tips together...?" Curiosity aroused, the other alicorn princesses complied.
Twilight's own horn lit up and she touched the tip to where all their horns met. The glow spread rapidly down their horns, slowly taking on their respective magical hues. The foals watched, entranced, as their siblings' eyes began to glow.

"Okay," Twilight said. "Like that and... no, right there... that, yes. Does everyone think they've got it?"

"Yeah. Uh huh. Oh my, um, yes...."

Twilight dismissed the magic from her horn. The glow faded and all six sat back, blinking and shaking their heads. "Whoo, Nelly," Applejack said. "Ain't that somethin'."

"Yeah, weird," Dash said, letting out a breath. "Felt like--"

"Like bumblebees flying up and down inside your horn?" Fluttershy proffered.

"Yeah."

"My horn feels like a straw full of fizzy soda!" Pinkie said, eyes crossed.

"You sure you all have it?" Twilight pressed.

"Yeah, Twi. I got it. I can sorta... feel it, sitting down right under my horn," Dash said. The others made sounds of agreement.

"Excellent. That's, well, an alicorn tracking spell, basically," Twilight said. "If you get within a mile or of another alicorn, you'll start to feel it. Any closer and you'll be able to feel the direction."

"Hey," Dash said suddenly, pointing at Celestia. "Why didn't you use that horn trick thing to teach Twilight all your magic? Why spend all that time with books and lessons and stuff?"

"She blew the roof off my school at the age of eight, Rainbow Dash," Celestia said with wry amusement. "I figured I'd better take it slow." She chuckled. "Besides, that 'fizzy' sensation is really, really, annoying. Learn too many spells like that, and you spend all your time feeling like your head is a shaken up jug of cola. Do it often enough and you not only have the world's most annoying headache, you can't cast any spells at all."

"Now I've written out our itineraries..." Twilight said. Scrolls flew to each of the mane 6. They unrolled them to reveal maps and lists of locations and coordinates. "I've plotted out a course for us that will allow us to cover the maximum amount of territory with the most thorough... Pinkie Pie, what are you doing?" The party alicorn had a pencil out and was busily scribbling away at her map and itinerary.

"Makin' corrections," she said.

"Pinkie, these don't need corrections," Twilight said, brows furrowed.

"Sure they do! You have mine missing all the FUN stuff!" She pointed. "Look, you have me up here in the North right when Maredi Gras is going on! And I completely miss Rio de JaMare-o during Carnival! And I go right past DizzyWorld without even stopping. Pass up DizzyWorld? NEVER!"

She went back to scribbling.
Rainbow Dash held up her own map. "Yeah, I gotta fix some of mine, too," she said.

"What??" Twilight snapped.

"Yeah, look-- you got me and the Wonderbolts in all the wrong places in all the wrong times. If we go here when you say to, that's long past the prime season for airshows and outdoor events. Here you got us arriving in the middle of rainy season. And there's a huge multinational airshow, with all sorts of fliers and flying machines from all over the world, you have us miss that one entirely which looks REALLY weird for the Wonderbolts to be missing..." She looked again. "Oooh, and there's this awesome Rockapalooza fest, definitely gotta swing by that--" She had a pencil of her own out, making changes.

"What, no comic book conventions?" Twilight said sarcastically.

"Oooh, thanks, Twi! Definitely gotta fit that in--" Dash stuck her tongue out and scribbled some more.

Scootaloo stuck her hoof into the map over Dash's shoulder. "Could we see BlastoCon? That's the video game convention, it's really cool--"

"Oh DEFinitely," Dash and Scootaloo high-hooved.

"Argh..."

"Now that y'all mention it..." Applejack said, rubbing her chin.

"Oh not you too!"

"Well come on, Twi!" Applejack said. "Ah'm a farmpony princess. Where else would ah go but to farm country an' county fairs and such? There's the corn festival in Rocky Top, and CiderFest, an' the agriculture convention, and the big rodeos... ponies 're gonna be lookin' for me there!"

"Oh my, that said, I would be remiss to pass up Mareis in Prance, or to not at least pass through... Oh, what about you Sweetiebelle, do you see any places that catch your eye?..."

"Oh, um, if you don't mind Twilight, I would like to catch the butterfly migration again this year--"

All five were soon going over their papers with pencils, quills and correction fluid, heads down with their junior compatriots, utterly demolishing Twilight's hours of work. Twilight turned to her mentor, waving a hoof helplessly. "I don't believe this! This is a, a, a serious exploratory expedition, and they're turning it into a vacation tour!"

Celestia laughed merrily. "Oh Twilight, think for a moment. You're sending alicorns out to find alicorns. Where would you search for more alicorns, but where an alicorn wants to go?"

"Indeed," Luna said. "Wouldst thou send a fish to search a desert? Let them go where their hearts, their cutie marks, and their Elements lead them. Tis as efficient a way to search as any, in the end."

"Come now," Celestia teased. "Surely you have a few places you would like to see while you're out roaming the world?"

Twilight bit her lip, fidgeting as she furiously fought temptation. Finally though she broke. "W-well... I have always wanted to see the ruins of Pommel-pei... a-and there's the Manhattan museum
of Natural History--" with that the dam broke. The quill was out and she was rescheduling like mad. "Girls, please at least keep our meet-up locations the same, okay?"

Celestia and Luna shared a knowing smile. Then suddenly Luna had a pink hoof thrown over her withers. "C'mon, Lulu!" Pinkie said. "You gotta help me with this travel plan thingy!"

"What? Why me?" Luna said suspiciously.

"Cause you're coming with me, of course!"

"Wait, what?"

"Oh come on, Lulu," Pinkie said. Luna winced at the nickname. "Everypony is taking somepony. Applejack is taking Babs and Applebloom, Rarity's taking Sweetiebelle, Fluttershy's taking Bishi, Dashie's taking Scootaloo, Twilight's taking Spike--- so I'm taking you!" She beamed. "Besides, I'm still your new faithful student, and you gotta teach me all about my luck magic, remember? And call me a negative nelly but I don't think it'd work as a correspondence course."

"That... is correct," Luna said with a sinking feeling.

Pinkie squashed her nose against Luna's, grinning. "Besides, you need to get out and have some fun! You're always such a grumpy-pony when you're out of the castle, and I'm just the pony to show you how to lighten up a little."

Luna scowled and tried to pull away. "I am not a 'grumpy po-nyerf," she said as two pink hooves smooshed her cheeks in.

"Awww, Oo's a gwumpy pony?" Pinkie said, pooching her lip out. "Oo's a gwumpy pony, yes oo is! Don't worry, Auntie Pinkie will fix everything!"

"I'm several millenia older than you," Luna growled. She pulled away and looked at her sister and beamed her one telepathic word:

Help!

Celestia just smiled. "Well, you two have fun..."

---

1) white hoof-polish, actually.
Chapter 11

The bell on the front door of the bookstore jingled. The young mare at the counter looked up from her cheap paperback, her eyes half-lidded with disinterest, fully expecting another idle browser. Her eyes flew wide when she saw who it was. She spit out her chewing gum and hastily dropped into an awkward bow as Princess Twilight Sparkle, Bearer of the Element of Magic, strode majestically through the front door.

The counter clerk was forced to correct herself; the princess wasn't exactly striding. She seemed more to be... *hopping*. Skipping with glee, actually, with a big grin on her face as she looked all around the store. She looked for all the world like a filly on her first unsupervised trip to the candy store. Her two stern-looking royal guards, wearing her cutie mark as their heraldry (on the breastplate of their oddly spray-painted looking armor) took positions just inside the doorway as she skipped merrily up to the counter. "Oh, um-- you may rise," she said.

The counter filly got to her feet. "May I help you... your Highness?" she said nervously.

"Oh, yes!" Princess Sparkle leaned over the counter, resting her chin on her hooves. "You know, I used to shop at this very bookstore all the time when I was a student," she said conversationally. "I just had to stop by here. You see I'm going on an extended trip soon and I would like to stock up on some reading material."

"Can I... fetch you something?" the counter mare said.

"Yes," Twilight Sparkle said. She suddenly started hopping in place. "Ooo I've always wanted to do this... I'll have one copy of each."

"Uh, one of each of what?"

Princess Sparkle looked out the door to the carriage still standing in the street. Her horn lit and a brass-trimmed chest floated in the door and settled on the counter. It popped open; it was filled to overflowing with bits.

"*Everything! Eeee!!*" Princess Twilight Sparkle, Bearer of the Element of Magic, co-ruler of Equestria and member of the newly minted Octarchy, started doing a gleeful hoofy-dance.

"Now, to begin at the beginning, we must needs explain the actual nature of thy powers." Luna said in a serious voice.

"Uh Huh," Pinkie said obediently.

The two alicorns were on board their airship, awaiting delivery and loading of supplies they had both ordered. Luna had noted that her new pupil Pinkie was abnormally calm and quiet, and had decided that this would be a good opportunity to give her an impromptu first lesson. To that end they had retreated to the cabin for a bit of quiet. Pinkie had plopped her rump on the floor, and Luna had begun lecturing on the nature of Pinkie's powers.

"To wit, the roots of thy unique powers lie in a very simple premise: thou hast the ability to see-- and move-- in more dimensions than others. There are three concepts, intertwined: *Time, Space, and Probability,*" Luna said, pacing back and forth. "Thou knowest, I assume, that simple space is made
up of three dimensions, height, width and depth--" here a glowing graph appeared in midair, illustrating. "-- and the fourth, Time. In essence, time and space are the same sort of thing...
dimension. We can all see and move in those dimensions, within limits. There are higher dimensions as well..."

Pinkie Pie raised her hoof like a schoolfilly. "Oh, like directions-- up, down, left, right, before, after, maybe, maybe not, purple, orange--" At Luna's bewildered expression she shrugged. "Well, that's what I call 'em."

"Ahh... quite," the lunar princess said. She shook her head and continued. "The point is: all those things are directions, along which you can see.. or move, given the right power and the right circumstances. Even what might be, and what might not be, are essentially directions one takes along a higher plane.

"In brief, thy gift is the ability to see, and to some extent move, in more directions than those few to which ponies are limited."

"Consider this." A hollow, translucent tube appeared in the air. "Imagine that this tube is Time. In one direction is the past, in the other is the future." A miniature pony appeared inside the tube and began walking along it. "As time passes, you move along it, from yesterday into tomorrow. Most ponies can only see the past, and the present, but not the future." The tube ahead of the pony suddenly fell dark, lighting up only as the miniature pony traveled along with it. "But your special gift allows you to see ahead of yourself--" the pony turned pink, with a frizzy mane... and the tube ahead of it lit up.

Pinkie Pie raised her hoof to her brow. "But my Pinkie Sense only works for little things a little ways ahead," she said. "Or really big big things-- but only a little further ahead. Why can't I see all the way to Next Tuesday, or Hearthwarming Day, or further?"

"An astute question. The answer lies in probability." The tube suddenly branched ahead of the pony, who stopped. "Now suppose you were to make a decision by flipping a coin. On one path, the coin turned up heads. On another path, the coin turned up tails. Now suppose you flipped the coin again... and again..." each branch forked, then forked again. "Each branch is a different path, a different choice. And the further you go, the more possible choices there are." The tube turned so that Pinkie could look down it. "As you can see, this makes the tube all... bendy and turny. so you can only see to the nearest fork, at most."

"A... fair description," Luna nodded. "The more likely a path of choices is, the more clearly you can 'see' it, unconsciously, and select it.

"For those with the Luckmaking gift, this 'sight' takes a lot of different forms. Some hear sounds or voices. Others see ghostly images, or have strange hallucinations. You, in particular, feel little twitches and itches and spasms when a notable event... it is your unconscious mind alerting you to something your conscious mind does not quite see.

"The more interesting aspect of your gift is that you are able to change which branch is most likely to happen." One path through the branching tubes widened. "Again, not by much, and not very far ahead... but enough to make a tangible difference. Like making it more likely that a load of furniture will fall on someone spying on you. Or that a pony playing tic-tac-toe with you will make a move
that will let you win." The mini-Pinkie trotted down the widened path. "Thus far you have done it entirely unconsciously, entirely by instinct. But with time and training you will be able to do so at will."

"Can you and Princess Celestia do all that?"

Luna shook her head. "Twas not part of our natural gifts," she said. "What we know of it, was gained through centuries of study and practice, and e'en then I am incapable of doing nearly as much nor as easily as thee. And dear sister--" Luna shrugged. "She can do little more than change a single coin-flip or a roll of the dice. Though she has managed to get herself in and out of unimaginable trouble countless times, it has been due to ruthlessly thorough planning, not the twisting of odds. Besides, she doth not like using it much."

"Why not?"

Luna paused. "We get the impression that she thinks it's cheating..."

"Moving on. As thou art able to navigate, within limits, through the bends and curves of time, thou art also able to move and see through the bends and curves of space." The tube turned into a thin, flat plane. The little pony reappeared and began walking across it. "Space, like time, has bends in it--ripples and curves and waves." the thin sheet warped and bent, developing folds and wrinkles. "Again, most ponies are unaware of these wrinkles, because they travel along the surface..." the mini-pony continued to walk along the undulating surface of the sheet. "But because thou art able to see in the extra directions we spoke of, thou art able to see the wrinkles and bends, and take shortcuts across them." The mini-Pinkie appeared and, confronted by a huge looping roll in the sheet, instead hopped across a narrow space where it crimped together. "Thou doest this instinctively." Luna smiled. "Which is rather confusing to the other ponies thou knowest."

"Oohhh." Pinkie poked at the illusion with a hoof, comprehension dawning. "You mean nopony else can see this stuff?" she said. "So that's why my friends act all funny when I take my special shortcuts, or I get stuff out of my special hiding places! That's so weird!"

Luna smiled to herself. It was all a matter of perspective. While Pinkie's antics may have been baffling to her friends, their inability to understand was just as bewildering to her. It would be like living with ponies who couldn't use windows or doors. "Of course, I am sure you have noticed, or you shall, as your awareness grows, that there are limits to your gifts. The universe is... resilient. It swiftly mends itself, and is resistant to change from the norm beyond certain small amounts. The greater the change, the greater the resistance and the impulse to snap back to the norm. There are gaps too wide for one to cross, and things one can no more readily change--- such as the past--- than one can push a mountain out of place. You will be able to do far more now that thou art an alicorn, and more importantly art aware of what thou art doing. But thy abilities are a gift and an advantage... not an absolute power."

Pinkie nodded, surprisingly sober. "So, what do I have to learn first?"

"Thou canst do much already with thy gift. But again, it is all instinctive. The many paths and possibilities are too numerous for the waking mind to sort through... so the unconscious, the sleeping mind, sifts through them for you, dropping faint hints to your conscious mind. Thy first goal, therefore, is to learn to consciously select the paths and directions thou desirest; to alter chance at will, to foresee with clarity, to move along those 'extra' spatial directions without using the mental sleight-of-hoof tricks thou currently useth to fool thyself-- ducking out of sight to appear elsewhere, or reaching for things with thy hoof with thy eyes averted."

"Oh, you mean like this?" Pinkie stuck her hoof in her mane. when she pulled it out, she was
wielding a small alligator.

Luna lurched back, eyes wide. "Ack! Um, yes, like that... " The alligator blinked and made a burping noise at her. Luna peered at it warily, head cocked sideways. "What in the cosmos..."

"Oh this is Gummy, my pet alligator." Pinky beamed.

*Well that explains the aquarium the longshoreponies loaded earlier,* Luna thought. "Where didst thou get him from?" Luna asked.

"The swamp."

Luna's eyebrows tabled. "I meant where didst thou fetch him from, *just now?*" she clarified patiently.

"The swamp, like I said," Pinkie said. She held Gummi up in her hooves. "See? His feet are still wet."

Luna made the mistake of leaning in too close. Without warning the diminutive swamp predator lunged forward and snapped its jaws shut on the end of her muzzle. Her shriek of dismay nearly blew out the cabin windows.

"Oooh, he likes you!" Pinkie cheered.

Luna shook her head frantically, finally dislodging the beast and sending it flying. It tumbled through the air and landed on Pinkie Pie's head, where it simply sat and blinked unemotionally at everything.

Luna felt her muzzle carefully, checking for toothmarks and finding none. A second glance at the lizard confirmed it; the creature had no teeth. "Why in the Maker's name do you have a toothless alligator as a pet?" Luna asked as calmly as she could manage.

"Cause the ostrich egg wouldn't fit in the aquarium, duh," Pinkie said, rolling her eyes.

"Wait. What?"

"Delivery for Princess Pie," somepony said. Luna looked up. A burly workpony was standing at the door, holding a clipboard. Eager to distract herself from the fact that she had just been bested by a toothless reptile, Luna strode up to the bowing stallion and took the clipboard from him. Her eyebrows rose as she read the manifest.

"One hundred bowling balls... three hundred and sixty five 'happy pine tree' carriage air fresheners... twenty four ACME brand cannons... a blender... six hundred boxes of instant cake mix... one ton of confetti... one hundred forty four pink flamingos... a bag of marbles... five bags of fortune cookies... a lug wrench... a box of elephant prophylactics... Five cans of purple paint... five cans of yellow paint... five cans of PINK paint... one jelly-bean pooping plastic moose... five spare tires... a rubber life raft... eight thousand Kewpie pony dolls(1)... a giant flyswatter... a toaster... one pair of each kind of 'Groucho Marks'(2) glasses... one live parrot... one dead parrot, stuffed..."

Luna's eye twitched. *Should I be concerned that I can imagine what she intends to use at least half of these things for...?* she wondered.

"Oh goodie!" Pinkie said, hopping (literally) to her hooves. "Scuse me, Lulu, but I gotta go put this stuff away."

"We knowest our sister did give thee and thy fellow Bearers access to the royal coffers," Princess Luna said in growing bafflement, "But whence didst thou purchase this disparate assembly of goods..?"
"Mail order," Pinkie said blithely, hopping off after the longshorepony. She tugged a book as thick as her leg from under the gator sitting on her mane and hoofed it to Luna on her way out the door. Luna read the title:

"WHOLE EARTH CATALOG."

Thus ended Luna's first lesson: no matter how much one explained her abilities, her history or her nature, Pinkie Pie was still Pinkie Pie.

"... and I know you all want to come along, but there's really not enough room, and besides some of you get such tummyaches when you travel," Fluttershy said. "Don't worry. Mr. Hayseed promises that he'll take good care of you all while I'm gone."

The Alicorn of Kindness was standing in the royal gardens. All her animal friends were standing in a semicircle in front of her, sniffing and whimpering and looking woeful. It was like being assaulted with a dozen Sad Puppy posters simultaneously. "Oh, please don't cry," Fluttershy pleaded. "Angel Bunny and I will write you all every day, I promise--"

Overwhelmed, the grizzly bear grabbed her and mashed her to his chest in a crushing hug. The pastel pony's eyes bugged. "Ack-- too tight, Mister Bear," she managed to squeak out. The bear let her go with an apologetic whuffle. "That's all right," Fluttershy panted, smoothing her rumpled mane out. "You meant well."

"Are you ready to go, Big Sister?" someone called faintly. Breezy Shy came striding into the garden. He smiled and bobbed his head meekly at the animals gathered around Fluttershy. They cheeped, chittered, or rumbled a greeting, as was their nature.

"Oh, certainly, Bishi," Fluttershy said, smiling. "We do have a lot of things to prepare before we start our journey. Excuse me, little friends--" the bear whuffed "--and big friends, but we have to be going. Buhbye..." With a final wave she left the garden, following her little brother.

Soon they were in the thick of the city. Two royal guard ponies fell in beside them. They went surprisingly unnoticed as they trotted down the avenue. Of course the sunhat Fluttershy was wearing over her horn might have had something to do with it, she realized. She was rather thankful that she hadn't gotten as tall as Celestia or Luna.

Fluttershy used her magic to pull a list from her saddlebag. "I'm so glad Twilight made up this pre-flight checklist for us," she said. "I know I would forget half these things before we left..." She looked over and noticed that Breezy Shy was looking rather anxious, looking about for something. "Is something wrong, Bishi?"

"Oh, um, no, not really," Breezy said, ducking his head. "I was just hoping to see my sensei before we set sail."

"Oh, he's here in Canterlot?"

Bishi nodded. "He's opening a new dojo today," he said.

"Well, I'm sure we can take the time," Fluttershy said. "Where is this new dojo?"

"It should be on this street," Breezy answered, looking around. His face brightened suddenly and he pointed. "There it is!" He started galloping across the street to a rather Neighponese looking building
with an enormous Kanji sign over the doorway.

"Bishi--!" Fluttershy exclaimed, galloping after him, their two guards clattering behind. When she got across the crowded street her little brother was already bowing to a figure standing in the front door. When she saw who it was, her jaw nearly scraped the sidewalk. It was an enormous, powerfully muscled minotaur in a red karate gi, returning her little brother's bow.

"Iron Will?"

The minotaur heard his name and turned to her. "Ah, Princess Fluttershy," he said. His voice was unnaturally calm. No, Fluttershy corrected herself. Serene. He pressed his palms together and gave her a ceremonial bow. "So you are the elder sister of one of my best pupils? I recognized the name but I did not make the connection."

"You know each other?" Breezy said in surprise, looking from one to the other.

"You, um, might say that," the princess said, looking aside awkwardly.

"Indeed we do," Iron Will said, in that startlingly tranquil voice. "You remember the story I told you, of my greatest and most important failure?"

This really surprised the colt. "Really? That was her?" He said, unbelieving. Fluttershy winced. His greatest failure?

Iron Will seemed to notice her wince. He chuckled. "Allow me to clarify. I tell all my students this story, because of its importance. How I was once a motivational speaker, trying to teach ponies assertiveness and self esteem. Till one day I took on a client-- a timid pegasus-- who took to my training seminars like a duckling to water." He smiled ruefully. "And it nearly ruined her life. She became everything she was not: aggressive, pushy, angry, even unfeeling and hurtful."

Fluttershy had blushed redder and shrunk down further with every word; at this point she was just shy of disappearing behind her own mane. "You, um, heard about that, did you?" she mumbled.

"I saw the property damage."

Fluttershy meeped.

"Finally, she refused to pay, invoking my satisfaction guarantee. I left empty handed-- and humbled." His smile broadened. "Which is why I call it my greatest--" he held up a finger-- "and most important failure." Fluttershy looked up in surprise.

"It was only when she refused to pay because she was so unhappy with the results that I realized my assertiveness training, for all it's effectiveness, was-- incomplete. It lacked balance. It was assertiveness without empathy, aggression without compassion, confidence without kindness. It was nothing but being brash and proud without anything to justify it, and much to belittle it.

"Confused, I closed down my seminars and began searching for the missing component. I found it in a distant land--"

"In Neighpon?" Fluttershy ventured.

"In Fresno. There was a dojo there with a pony who taught me the way of Karate-- the empty hand. Er, Hoof." He scratched the back of his head. "I learned there to have strength with focus, and that meekness is not weakness, it is strength under control."
"That you don't have to step on others to stand up for yourself," Bishi chimed in.

Iron Will nodded to the colt. "My dojo's motto," he said to Fluttershy, cocking an eyebrow.

Fluttershy surprised herself by giggling. "Well, it's not as snappy as 'If they block, show them you rock,' she said. "But it's catchy enough."

"So what brings the Princess of Kindness to my humble dojo today?" Iron Will asked.

"My little brother," Fluttershy said simply. "He wanted to say goodbye."

At Iron Will's questioning look, Breezy Shy filled him in. "We're going on a long trip," he said, shuffling one hoof. "We're looking for--" he paused. "Um, important stuff. I don't know when I'll be back to the dojo again, and I just wanted to say goodbye, and I'll miss you." He looked up a little sadly.

"Well then, thank you for giving me this opportunity, Breezy," Iron Will said. "I shall miss you, as well. And do not say goodbye. Say 'Till we meet again.' I have learned much from you." He looked at Fluttershy. "From both of you. Thank you both." He bowed deeply to them both.

Fluttershy dimpled. "And... I suppose we both have learned much from you, too," she said. "Thank you, Iron Will." She and breezy both returned the bow, their wings flaring gracefully.

"...And this is the, um..." Applejack waved a hoof absently at the opulent room she, Applebloom and Babs found themselves in.

"The royal cabin, your highness," one of the guards standing next to her muttered in her ear.

"--The royal cabin, where we'll be hangin' our hats," Applejack finished. "Thank ya, Zeke," she muttered. "stick close and keep feedin' me cues, fellas, I'm lost as a chicken in a cornfield."

Unlike the rest of the Bearers, Applejack quite frankly had no clue whatsoever as to how to outfit her ship. She wasn't high society, she didn't have a clue what she'd need for a long quest like this, and she was stumped for any ideas on how to outfit a royal airship, of all things, for the comfort of an earth pony like herself. She did know how to delegate, though. Once Twilight had written out that checklist, Applejack had promptly turned to a couple of the servants Celestia had given her, handed the list to them, said "Gussy it up, but keep it in budget" and left them to it. It was with some dry amusement that Applejack noted that her own zeppelin was fully furnished and kitted out before any of the others.

To pass the time before the big launching, she and the girls were taking a tour of their new home-away-from-home. From what she could see the fancy looking ponies she'd picked(3) had done a bang up job. The ship had all the comforts of home and then some. Nothing was excessively frilly or fru fru, but everything was top quality and sturdy built, and even a bit plush, here and there. The kitchen was top notch, the larders were stocked full of good hearty food, the bathrooms had a nice big shower and tub, a fancy sit-down hair dryer and all the primping tools a princess could ever need, even a magically heated seat on the... well, you know.... the furniture was comfortable and the beds were as plush and soft as a featherdown dream. It might not be as fancy paints as Rarity's airship was bound to be, but it was as luxurious as anything the Apples had ever had.

The cabin in particular was well fitted out. It had a large writing desk to one side, a table in the center for dining and for meetings, a couple of bookshelves, a beverage cabinet full of cut glass decanters,
and a four poster bed large enough for a whole pony family.

Applebloom and Babs took one look at the enormous four poster bed in the cabin and ran straight for it with the full and obvious intention of bouncing on it like a trampoline. "Wheee!" they both shouted. They leaped up onto the bed-- and disappeared with a *flumph*.

Both the guards broke up laughing. Applejack wasn't doing too good at keeping a straight face herself. After a moment Applebloom's ribboned head poked back up out of the mounds of pillows and pegasus-down comforters. "Hokey Smokes, Applejack," she said. "Yer gonna need a *snorkle* to sleep in this thing!"

Two orange hooves poked up out of the bed and waved in the air. "What'd dey make dis thing outta, marshmallow fluff?" Babs demanded, her voice muffled.

Shaking with laughter, Applejack used her still-shaky levitation to help the two climb back out of the pitfall of a bed. "Well we know the beds are nice an' soft," she chuckled as they tumbled to the floor. "So whaddya think of our little home away from home, eh?"

"I think it's the bee's knees," Applebloom said enthusiastically. "I'm up for the trip!"

Applejack grinned. "What about you, Babs? At the very least you'll get away from your problems back in Manehattan for awhile." At this, Babs' face fell. "Hold on, what wrong, sugarcube?"

"Oh, nuthin' really, Cousin Applejack," Babs said. "I.. I'm just kinda worryin' about my friends at school. The other Manehattan Cutie Mark Crusaders, you know? I feel kinda bad. I mean, I'm getting away, but they're gonna be stuck back there with Pennyworth and his jerk friends."

Applejack let out a snort of amusement. "Oh, I don't think you have to worry about that none..."

The pegasus carriage landed at the front gate of Sweet Apple Acres. Six very unhappy looking colts and fillies piled out. Their baggage hit the dust behind them, and without a second glance back the carriage rattled off, going airborne a ways down the road and leaving them behind. Pennyworth, Ivy, Marzipan, Ruby Drop, Bullhorn and Air Drop found themselves facing a withered old nag of a mare with an apple pie cutie mark and an absolute hulking monster of a stallion who wore a heavy wooden yoke around his neck like it weighed no more than a bow tie.

The red stallion eyed them all up and down with half lidded eyes, chewing on a stalk of grass, but said nothing. The old mare wasn't so quiet. "Yer late," she said. "Hey, that ain't our fault," Pennyworth said, trying to put on an air of indifference. "We didn't fly the carriage ourselves."

"Ah didn't say it was yer fault, I just said yer late," the mare said. "Not that I care either way."

"As I understand it, you six whippersnappers got yerself in a peck o' trouble," she went on. "Pickin' on foals, startin' fights in the royal palace. And If I don't miss my guess," she said, giving Pennyworth's still-bruised face the gimlet eye, "You found out the hard way you dun picked on the wrong pony. But that don't surprise me; it takes a special kind o' fool to pick on the kinfolk of the Princesses." The bullies scowled or flinched, but said nothing.

"Anyhow, we got word from Princess Celestia that you little hooligans got the deal of the century. Instead a' sendin' you to JUVIE HALL for assualtin' royalty--" here the six of them did flinch ---"
"Th' Princesses are lettin' you work off your debt to society here on the farm." The old mare seemed to catch Marzipan's grimace and decided to ladle it on. "That means pullin' weeds, haulin' wood, mendin' fences, plowin' and hoein' fields, sloppin' the hogs--"

"Slopping hogs??" Marzipan shrieked. "I can't be around filthy, smelly pigs!!"

"Never stopped ya before," the old mare said sarcastically.

"Heyyy---" Air Drop complained. She just ignored him.

Pennyworth snorted disdainfully. "You can't make us do anything..."

The nag cocked an eyebrow at him. "And you can't make us feed ya," she said. "Maybe you ain't figgered it out yet, boy. Celestia done told your parents to cut you off." The six miscreants gaped. "That's right. You ain't gonna buy your way out with Daddy's money here in Ponyville. And out here yer fancy name don't mean tiddly boo. You got no money, and you ain't got nooo credit. You dun been blackballed, boy."

She got right up in Pennyworth's face, squinting at him with one eye. Her breath smelled of stale apples. "You'll do what we say, when we say it. You'll get up with the rooster and go to bed with the hens, and you'll do all the work we give you in between and like it. And if'n ye don't-- ye don't eat till ya do." She backed off, turned around and headed up the trail to the farmhouse. "Git yer things," she said. "Big MacIntosh here will show y'all where you'll be sleepin'. Him an' the other workers the Princesses sent will git ya started."

She looked over her shoulder. "By the way: from time to time you'll be goin' into Ponyville. If'n I git word you've been bullyin' any of the colts or fillies there like you did my granddaughters, I'll light you up like a Hearthwarming tree."

"And then when I'm done I'll hand over what's left of ya to Big MacIntosh." That said, she walked off.

The six froze in the act of picking up their luggage. "Her... granddaughters?" Ruby Drop squeaked.

"Wait," Pennyworth said unhappily. "Sweet Apple Acres. As in the Apple family? You mean they're related to..."

A shadow fell over him. He looked up to find Big MacIntosh looming over him like a mountain of doom. The enormous stallion picked up their luggage and piled it on his back, carrying all of it as effortlessly as if it was filled with feathers. He put his blunt, shaggy maned head down till he was eye to eye with Pennyworth.

"Eeyup," he said.

He strode off for the farmhouse.

As soon as he was out of earshot, Bullhorn spoke for all of them.

"Oh, horseapples," he whimpered.

---

1) -- pink with pink hair, white with purple hair, purple with purple hair, orange with yellow hair,
yellow with pink hair, blue with rainbow hair, white with rainbow hair, and dark blue with dark blue hair.

2) Yes, there's a pony named Groucho Marks. He's world famous for his comedy props, most particularly his wide selection of goofy glasses—x-ray specs, spiraly eyes, slinky eyes, coke bottle nerd, and of course the ones that got him his cutie mark as a colt, the classic goofy-nose-with-mustache.

3) A rather confused footman and chambermaid.
"You're gonna check out everypony's airship, aren't ya," Sweetiebelle said as they trooped down the gangplank. It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes, yes we are," Rarity said.

"Aren't you gonna make them mad?" Sweetiebelle said artlessly.

"Well-- yes, I might," Rarity confessed. "Really, though, it's better if we do it than to wait for somepony like Hoity Toity or some dreadful gossip magazine to do it, isn't it?"

"Why?"

"Well let me put it this way, Sweetiebelle," Rarity said. "Suppose Applebloom or Scootaloo had something embarrassing-- like, oh, their manes were sticking up like a fright wig, or they had something icky on their faces, and they didn't know it. Wouldn't you rather be the one to tell them, than have some mean pony tell everyone?"

Sweetiebelle shuddered as she pictured her friends falling into the clutches of Diamond Tiara or Silver Spoon that way. "I guess so," she said.

Rarity was in a bit of a tizzy. Ever since their ascendancy, her delight in being not merely a princess but an alicorn princess had been overwhelming-- but she had been nagged by certain gnawing worries. Her own fitness to fill the role of royalty, and to a lesser degree the readiness of her friends for such a thing. She was a fashionista, not a fool, and she knew that style and image among the rich, noble and powerful was just about everything and... well, she had to be honest, she loved her friends dearly but as far as style and image went, they were SO not ready. When she had heard the girls were all decorating and refurbishing their respective airships, any plans for her own shopping immediately went by the wayside--- they simply had to; she would never forgive herself if she let her friends go out on this epic diplomatic mission with anything less than a vessel outfitted in a manner worthy of princessly fabulousness.

To her surprise and relief, Twilight and Applejack both had left such matters as haute decor to their staff. Fluttershy's own sense of style-- dressmaking disasters to the contrary-- was as marvelous as Rarity's own (and if all else failed, Fluttershy was sure to go along meekly with any suggestions her staff made.) Pinkie Pie... she really just gave up as a lost cause. Rarity knew better than to try to ice skate uphill.

The thought of Rainbow Dash as an emissary for the land of Equestria, however, was enough to throw Rarity into an apoplexy. When Rainbow Dash had bragged that she had pretty much gotten everything in her ship squared away, days before anypony else, Rarity had decided her own equipage could wait. She took Sweetiebelle and made a beeline for Rainbow Dash's ship, visions of a diplomatic ship plastered in Wonderbolt posters and littered with pizza boxes hovering before her eyes.

This was going to take some tact.. and some tactics.

"Princess Rarity and, erm, Duchess I believe? Duchess Sweetie Belle, yes-- requesting permission to board?" Rarity said at her most demure.
The crewpony at the gangplank called it back. "Permission granted," the call came back, in a familiar raspy voice. Rainbow Dash popped up over the rail. "Hey, Rares," she called out. "Welcome aboard the Thunderstreak." She puffed out her chest a bit. "What brings you by?"

Rarity ascended the gangplank with her typical grace, Sweetie Belle trailing along behind. "Well I simply had to come by and see you before we set sail, dear," Rarity said. She stepped aboard and gave her friend a look. Then a second one. To her surprise, Rainbow Dash was wearing her element necklace. She was also wearing the gilded sandals and the gilded laurel-leaf barettes from her Gala outfit.

Rainbow noticed Rarity giving her the once over and grinned. "Something wrong, Rarity?" she asked.

"I-- well, darling, you never seemed the one for adornment, after all," Rarity said. She noted that the former pegasus' mane and tail were neatly groomed, as well. Interesting. One would suppose though that even Rainbow Dash couldn't elude her staff's attempts to groom their princess forever.

"Eh well... I guess maybe there's no getting around some parts of this gig," Rainbow said with an air of resignation. A moment later Scootaloo came trotting up from below decks. The little filly was wearing a Rainbow Dash t-shirt and carrying a clipboard. Her usual fan paraphrenelia, a hat with a rainbow mane glued to the top, was missing and had been replaced with a winged baseball cap. Still a bit kitschy, but at least not as unsettling to look at. "New hat, Scootaloo?" Sweetiebelle piped up.

"Yup!" Scootaloo grinned.

"Yeah, I talked her into trading that thing in," Rainbow said. "At least this one doesn't look like she scalped me." Scootaloo looked mortified at the very notion while Sweetiebelle giggled.

"Well, would it be forward of me to ask for a little tour of your airship?" Rarity said. "I would so love to see what you've done with it--"

Rainbow Dash chuckled. "Yeah, and make sure I don't embarrass us all, right?" She said. "Oh c'mon, Rares, it's me here! I know you're just looking out for us. C'mon, we'll give you the nickel tour." They did a quick trot through of the guest quarters, the crew quarters, the dining hall...

Rarity was floored. "Why Rainbow Dash, this is... this is elegant!" She stood in the middle of the dining hall, turning about. Like the other rooms, everything had been painted in soft cloud white. Banisters and balustrades were gleaming bronze. The furniture was all light and airy pieces with fine scrolled metal frames and neat, but marvelously soft padding. Fine Roamin scrollwork was visible--not much, just a touch here and there. The table in the dining hall was covered in fine linen and a quick peek in the pantries had revealed fine, if not particularly ornate, china and silverware. It wasn't all particularly baroque, but anypony of any upper social clique would feel perfectly comfortable here. And so would someone from the more pedestrian classes, Rarity realized. Elegant enough for the upper crust, simple enough for the, ah, down home types. Rainbow Dash, it seemed, had some surprising depths.

"Don't get too giddy," Rainbow Dash said. "I just told 'em to go Cloudsdale retro, and let 'em go at it."

"Cloudsdale Retro?" Rarity said, blinking.

"Yeah," Dash said. She looked down and scuffed a hoof. "It's my Mom's favorite style. Did everything in the house that way that Dad would let her. She's always been a real classy lady. Kept my Dad and me from turning into caveponies. Heh. I figured if Cloudsdale Retro was good enough
for her, it was good enough for me. And there's a practical reason too."

"How so?"

Dash grinned. "Repeat after me. Clouds-daaale. Us pegasi are awesome at making stuff super tough and super light. Kinda comes with having houses made outta cloud. Don't want your sofa falling through the floor after all."

Rarity had a vision of some poor unfortunate earth ponies getting an ottoman through their roof. "Yes, that would be bad," she said.

"Anyway, all Cloudsdale furniture and fixtures, equipment, right down the the silverware in the dining hall-- nothing made outta clouds, guests and stuff, ya know. But I figure we saved at least fifty tons in weight."

"That much?"

"It adds up quick. Yeah, I figure with the lower weight and the new engines, this baby is gonna just zip through the air faster than anything out there." Rainbow Dash made 'zooming' motions through the air with her hooves.

Rarity chuckled to herself. It would be all about the speed to Rainbow Dash, in the end.

"...And I realized you might have your hooves full at the moment, and selecting your security detail might be-- a bit far from your foremost thoughts," Celestia said. "So I thought to offer some recommendations."

"Thank you, Celestia," Twilight Sparkle said. "I have to admit the thought did cross my mind to ask you." They strode up the gangplank of Twilight's airship, the Guiding Star. As they stepped aboard, a guard in golden armor called out "Princess on Deck! Atten HUT!" eighteen ponies snapped to attention.

"At ease," Celestia said. "Thank you, Lieutenant." The ponies relaxed, but just. "As you can see you have five pegasi, five thestrals, five unicorns and five earth ponies in this group. Oh excuse me, seven pegasi, counting the Lieutenant and his second-in-command. A bit more airborne guard than anything but considering your mode of transportation, probably for the best. All of these gentlecolts received the highest marks in their graduating classes before joining the Guard, so don't feel that they'll fall behind if you start talking shop."

"That's, um, good," Twilight said. She was surrounded at the moment by strapping young warrior stallions and was feeling unaccountably distracted for some reason.

"This," Celestia said, gesturing to the Lieutenant, "is Lieutenant Flash Sentry." The Lieutenant took off his helmet, revealing a backswept blue mane and coltish good looks. "He got his promotion rather recently, actually. He distinguished himself at a minor incident in the Crystal Empire, when a former pupil of mine attempted to infiltrate the castle via a magic mirror." There was a fleeting expression of sadness on Celestia's face. "Thanks to his quick actions she was captured before she could escape. He seemed the ideal candidate to take charge of your security detail."

"It's an honor to serve," he said, giving Twilight a dazzling smile. Twilight suddenly found herself very distracted. Goodness he had such very blue eyes.
"So would you say these gentlecolts meet your approval?" Celestia asked her.

"Hmmm. What? Oh. Um. Meep-- I mean um, yes! Yes, of course," Twilight stammered.

"Excellent!... Gentlecolts?" Flash Sentry nodded and knelt at Twilight's hooves. The soldiers all knelt as well. Twilight blinked then looked up at Celestia. "Um... what?"

"They're waiting for you to give them their crest, Twilight," Celestia said, her cheeks dimpling in amusement.

"Oh? Oh!" For the first time Twilight noticed that their armor lacked either the crest of the sun or of the moon on the breastplate. Where it should have been was a blank round disc. Twilight paused. "Um. What do I do?" She stage whispered to Celestia.

Celestia giggled. "Just touch your horn to the disc, Twilight" she said patiently. Twilight nodded and quickly touched the tip of her horn to the blank disc on Flash Sentry's breastplate. There was a soft flash of purple light, and suddenly every soldier had Twilight Sparkle's cutie mark on their breastplate. "Repeat after me, Twilight: 'We dub thee..."

"Um, We dub Thee..."

"Our Twilight Guard."

"Our Twilight Guard."

"And that pretty much does it," Celestia finished.

"And that pretty mu--- oh. ERm." Twilight facehoofed as Celestia tittered. A light chuckle rippled through the guard. "As time goes on you can add your own little flourishes to the ceremony, " Celestia went on, "But the gist of it is about the same regardless."

To Twilight's mild surprise her new guards actually started talking quietly among themselves. Twilight even saw a couple of them give each other a brohoof out of the corner of her eye. She didn't really mind; It was kind of a relief that they weren't as formal as Celestia's white-coated soldiers.

White coats.... "I... just noticed," she said quietly to Celestia. "They're not--"

"Not all white?" Celestia said. "Yes, the coloring enchantment isn't set yet. Lulu and I thought you might like to set your own color preferences for your Guards. Or even simply go with none at all, there's no real problem with it."

"I'd better just let them go with their natural coloring," Twilight decided. "I'm going to have enough difficulty remembering all their names without them all looking alike." Though maybe she'd go with the Lieutenant's colors for the whole group, eventually. Golden tan and dark blue--- sunset colors, really. And he certainly looked good in it at least.

Now why did that thought make her blush?

Celestia chuckled and nodded. "And you might consult with Rarity about color schemes for their armor. Don't worry about the crests; they detach." She tapped her chin. "Perhaps indigo with gold trim? Sunset colors..."

"Your highnesses?" Flash Sentry said. "With your permission?"

Celestia looked to Twilight. "Oh, of course," Twilight said. "Um. Dismissed?"
Flash Sentry turned to his troops. "You heard the Princess, Gentlecolts; Dismissed! Those on duty report to your posts. Go on, break it up, you look like a cadet review." The soldiers laughed and dispersed. He turned back to Twilight. "Will there be anything else, your Highnesses?"

"You will have to ask your Princess, Captain," Celestia said. "You answer to her, now."

"Oh. Of course," Flash said with a respectful head bob. He blinked and looked back at her. "'Captain?'"

"Indeed, you're the Captain of the new Twilight Guard, are you not?" Celestia said, dimpling. "A promotion as my last act as your direct commander."

At this the young soldier seemed to stand a little taller and his smile got a little brighter. "Thank you, your Highness," he said, saluting. "Will there be anything else, your Highness?" he said to Twilight.

"No, no... that will be all," Twilight said, doing her best to echo her mentor's regal delivery.

That sort of fell to pieces when he took her hoof in his. "Please, allow me to add on a personal note that I look forward to working in your service, Princess Twilight," he said with a bow.

Twilight felt her cheeks grow warm. "Meep." With another bow he turned and left. Celestia gave her an amused, knowing look. "What?" Twilight said a trifle abruptly.

"Oh nothing," Celestia said sweetly.

Twilight gave a quick shake of her head. "Are you helping the other girls with this?"

Celestia nodded. "Lulu helped a bit, but tended to defer to my judgement," she admitted. "Dash is of course getting a team of Wonderbolts. I tried to pick out guards from rural backgrounds for Applejack. Pinkie Pie, I actually managed to find a group of former bouncers--"

"Bouncers?" Twilight said. She thought about it a moment. "Oh. Ponies used to wild parties..."

"And a high tolerance for the outrageous," Celestia added with a chuckle. "Pinkie dubbed them the Bouncer Brigade."

"I suppose it sounds a little less silly than the 'Pinkie Guard,' " Twilight admitted. "And Fluttershy and Rarity?"

"Rarity? Well..." Celestia paused. "Tell me, Twilight; did you ever wonder where all the mares in my Royal Guard were?"

"Mares? Truthfully, no," Twilight said. "I... suppose I figured that since stallions are generally larger, stronger, and naturally more aggressive that you opted for them preferentially."

"Size and strength aren't always everything," Celestia said. "I actually do have quite a few females in the Guard... but they don't generally wear the royal armor. As you pointed out, stallions are generally larger, stronger, and more aggressive-- so putting males in the armor makes more sense. Mares have advantages too, though-- ones better suited for more covert security. I'm sure you'll note I have a surfeit of mares on castle staff roaming the halls all the time--?" she hinted.

"Ohhhh," Twilight said. "They're actually guard ponies?"

"Plain Clothes security," Celestia clarified. "Though 'plain clothes' will hardly describe them accurately now that they're working for Rarity." She dimpled. "I reasoned that she might be better off
with guards who would be more tolerant of her...ah..."

"...Tendency to treat ponies like a clothes horse?" Twilight giggled.

"Yes. Oh she has a few male guards in armor for intimidation, but otherwise-- well I suspect she's going to have the most fabulous security detail in Equestria." The two giggled together like schoolfillies.

"They can do a good job, though?" Twilight said.

"The filly who shampoos my mane could subdue a full-grown stallion in three hoof strikes," Celestia said. "Never you fear, your fellow Princess is in good hooves."

The vision of Aloe and Lotus flipping Big Macintosh around like a rag doll crossed Twilights mind. She shook it off. "And Fluttershy?" she asked.

"That took some thought," Celestia said. "Though I'm not sure a filly who regards grizzly bears as house pets really needs much of a Guard," she said as a wry aside. "Many of the Guard have done a tour of duty on the Northern border of the Everfree. Those were my first choice. Among those, I wrangled a few who had former jobs guarding the nurseries of various nobles, two who'd stood watch a great deal in the library, a couple who worked for Duchess Pinochle and her corgis, a few who had volunteered for patrols in the royal gardens, two or three who worked for Lady Eiderdown-"

"Lady Eiderdown?"

"Surely you've heard of Eiderdown's Angoras."

"Oh yes--- the ones made entirely of baby bunny fur." Twilight considered the eclectic mix. "So, guards who were good around nature, who'd dealt with small children and animals, who were good at keeping quiet, and familiar with dealing with timid and skittish wards..."

Celestia nodded. "I did have a final screening process, though." She lowered her head to Twilight's ear. "I just looked for ones that got soppy looks on their faces whenever she walked past them," she said, her voice rich with amusement.

Twilight giggled. Fluttershy did have that effect.

"They're all quiet as mice, gentle as lambs, patient as mountains and ferocious as lions," Celestia said. "She is, as I said before, in good hooves. I daresay they'd break anypony in half that even looked at dear Fluttershy the wrong way."

"They'd have to beat half the animal kingdom to the punch," Twilight reflected. "The swearing-in ceremony was... interesting," Celestia mused.

"I um, dub thee the Forest Guard," Fluttershy said. She felt rather pleased with herself for coming up with that name on the spot. She lowered her horn and tapped the burly pegasus' breastplate. Pink butterflies appeared on all the guards' crests. "Arise."

"YEEEEAAHHH!!"

"Meep?!" Fluttershy jumped.
"WILL THERE BE ANYTHING ELSE, YOUR HIGHNESS?"

"Eep!? No... Captain Snowflake?"

"AS YOU COMMAND! DISMISSED! HOOAAAHPPP!!!"

"Oh... My...."

"Perhaps I should say 'mostly quiet as mice...!' " Celestia said upon reflection.

"I don't suppose they're all that thrilled having to wear big pink butterflies on their uniforms, though," Twilight hazarded a guess.

"They've found ways to cope, I understand," Celestia said.

The newly inducted Guard sat at the bar in his favorite waterhole, chin on his hoof, idly staring at his beer. It took a few minutes for the other off-duty soldiers from the Day and Night Guard to notice the new crest on his breastplate; when they did the predictable razzing began. Two of the Day Guard, rough looking fellows back that day from their first tour on the borders, sat down beside him and began needling him.

"Hoo, lookee here," one said. "looks like New Boy finally got inducted. We hear you got a permanent gig, too-- babysitting one of the royal houses. Momma must be so proud. Aww, look." He smirked at the garish pink butterfly decorating the soldier's chest. "He's in the Butterfly Brigade!"

The two laughed.

The other one hooted and tapped the rookie's breastplate. "Who in the heck in the royal family has a crest like that?"

The rookie said nothing. He didn't look up from his beer. His expression didn't even change. He just reached under his breastplate, pulled out a picture, and hoofed it over to them.

The first one took a look and nearly choked. "Whoa." His eyebrows climbed up his forehead. "That's who you're guarding?"

"One of the new princesses, Princess Fluttershy," the rookie said.

The other guard looked over and whistled. "Dude," he said reverently. "I'd wear a tutu on duty to be around that." The other took a pull on his beer.

The rookie pulled a fashion magazine out of his saddlebag and handed it to them. "Page thirty eight," was all he said. They turned to the page; the one taking a drink sprayed half his beer across the bar.

Photo Finish, contrary to all reason, logic, and probability, had managed, just once, to talk Fluttershy into doing one photo shoot in a negligee.

"I hear she wears that to bed," the rookie said idly.(1) He allowed himself a tiny smirk.

The two looked at him. "I hate you and everything you stand for, and I want to be you more than
Anything in life," one said weakly.

"Well. Now we have a Radiant Guard, a Storm Guard, a Forest Guard, a Day Guard, a Night Guard, a Twilight Guard--" Celestia suddenly stopped and let loose an uproarious laugh. It was the most robust laugh Twilight had heard the Princess ever give.

"What, what is it Princess?" Twilight asked.

Celestia continued laughing. She wiped her eyes with a wingtip. "Don't you get it?" she said. "Day... Night... Twilight..."

"Oh. Yeah. Aheh?" Twilight said uncertainly.

"After all this time, would you believe that's the very first time I noticed the pattern?" Celestia chortled.

"...Ahh," Twilight said, in the tone that usually indicates one has gotten the joke and doesn't quite understand why it's *that* funny.

"Ah well, I suppose some things seem funnier at my age," Celestia said, a bit disappointed. She looked down at her former pupil with a smile. Then, to Twilight's surprise, she began to cry.

"Celestia, what's wrong?" Twilight said, alarmed. She stepped closer to give a comforting nuzzle, only to be swept up in Celestia's enormous wings.

"Twilight," Celestia said brokenly. "You don't know... you don't know what it means to me that you ascended. To have raised you, mentored you, knowing all the while that you would be gone so swiftly-- I tried to keep myself distant but I couldn't. You were such a darling foal. You were-- are-- so precious to me. And now you're an alicorn as well... it's like heaven has granted me a reprieve...." she smiled, tears rolling down her face.

Twilight was moved. For the first time it really sank in; Celestia was like a mother. A mother to Twilight, to all her little ponies--only she was a mother of a terminally ill child, forced to watch helplessly as her foal died of some cruel and pointless disease a few short months after it was born.

Only for Celestia, it had happened over and over and over again, countless thousands of times... she burrowed into her mentor's embrace, returning it awkwardly with her own wings. "We'll beat this, Celestia," she said softly. "I promise."

There was a bassoon-like honk. The two broke their embrace to see one of the airship's crew standing nearby, snuffling into an enormous kerchief and wiping his eyes. He saw them looking and hastily went back to work, still puffy-eyed, pretending nothing had happened.

Twilight and Celestia laughed. "Goodness, my moods are all over the map today," Celestia said, wiping her eyes with a wingtip. "Take that as a warning, dear Twilight; immortality is no protection against the ravages of hormones."

"Oh, um--" Twilight said.
"Well enough of that," Celestia said cheerily. "I would like to get the chance to talk with your airship's captain, if I could? See if he has any concerns to address."

"I believe he's in his quarters," Twilight said. "He might have a few, yes..."

The day of the launch arrived. Ponies by the thousands were gathered at the airship port, celebrating the big event. Personally Twilight was amazed that the ponies of Canterlot weren't burned out on celebrations after the coronation.

The six (and their young charges) boarded their vessels, escorted through the throngs by their personal Guards. Celestia, accompanied by Discord of all creatures, gave a brief speech to the crowds, heralding their 'tour' and wishing them safe journey. Twilight chuckled as she recalled the little farewell chat Fluttershy had with the Chaos entity...

"Now Discord, I want you to promise me you'll be a good boy while I'm gone," Fluttershy said. The magically manacled draconequus gave her a sly smirk. "Oh now, where's the fun in that?"

"I mean it, Discord," she said, not even raising her voice. "Be nice and mind Celestia, or else."

"Oh, that's a cue if I ever heard one," Discord said. "Okay, I'll play along." He curled over in midair, resting his chin on his hand, and smirked into Fluttershy's face. "Or else what? Oh wait, let me guess-- the Stare, again?" He chortled.

Fluttershy smiled sweetly. "Yes." Then she gave him the Stare.

The new, improved, you-forgot-I'm-an-alicorn-now-didn't-you Stare.

There was a loud bang. When the smoke around Discord's head cleared, his mane and beard were blown back and there was nothing left of his eyes but two empty sockets in his scorched, blackened face. He reached up and cranked one antler around; two new eyeballs dropped in from somewhere in the back of his skull and rolled into place. "Point taken," he said meekly.

There was a cheer from the crowds, and slowly the six airships began to pull away from the cliffside.

They were something of an eclectic mix. Each of the dirigibles had their envelopes in their Princess' coat color, and their cutie mark near the tailfins for easy identification. Twilight's vessel, the Guiding Star, was easily recognizable by it's deep purple and the star cutiemark. Though if you asked anypony else, the telescopes and weather instruments jutting out of the back from her cabin windows were as big a giveaway. Twilight had turned half the ship into a library and the other half into a laboratory, at least to hear the captain gripe about it.(2) She was an older, slower ship but she was a steady, smooth flier, level as a table, even in strong winds; something Twilight was grateful for, as it would make any work she did aboard ship much easier.

She could see Rainbow Dash's Thunderstreak. She was already, predictably, at least a couple of ship's lengths from the city. The Thunderstreak was a long, sleek thing, with a surprisingly elegant
look. The ship was painted in cloud white, and trimmed in brass that looked as fine as filigree at this distance. She gave the impression of having every spare ounce shaved away, all for swiftness and speed. Rainbow Dash was hard to miss; rather than stand on the forecastle like the other girls, she was aloft, flying circles and doing stunts around her ship with her Wonderbolt entourage. The crowds along the cliff were certainly eating it up.

Applejack's ship drew her attention next. There wasn't much to distinguish it... Well, save from the barn red color it was painted. Twilight could only wonder if the color was Applejack's choice, a well-meaning gesture by one of the crew for the surely homesick princess, or a pragmatic choice based on what would go best with the orange balloon. Applejack had wanted to name the ship the Granny Smith, until the real Granny Smith had threatened to wallop her. "Ah'm too old and had too many young'uns to be the name of no maiden ship," she'd said. Applejack had relented, and settled for naming the ship the Blossom.

There was something peculiar going on with the Surprise, Pinkie's ship. "Spike, give me my spyglass, would you?" Twilight said.

The little dragon pulled it out of the bag slung at his hip and handed it to her. "What's wrong, Twi?" he asked.

"There's something funny with Pinkie's airship," she said. She raised the glass in her magic to her eye.

"You mean besides that shade of pink?" Spike snarked.

"That's her coat color, smart mouth," she said absently over her shoulder. "Something wrong with that?"

"Well nothing-- in Pinkie Pie sized doses," Spike argued. "A balloon the length of a city block? Just a little too much, if ya ask me. Especially in 'metallic shimmer.' " The local fauna seemed to agree; Twilight could see seagulls flying off in cockeyed spirals, shaking their heads, whenever the gigantic pink balloon crossed their flight path. But that wasn't what was bugging Twilight. Nor was it the fact that Luna was standing in the forecastle with Pinkie, wearing a put-upon expression and what appeared to be a cardboard pirate hat from a popular fish eatery.(3)

No, it was the fact that the gun ports down the side of the Surprise were open, cannons sticking out, and Pinkie Pie (wearing her own cardboard pirate hat) was holding a sword aloft, giving the signal to the crew to fire--

She dropped her spyglass in horror. "Pinkie, what are you doing--" Twilight screeched, just as the cannons roared.

Twilight sagged in relief when she saw the confetti. "Party cannons. That crazy mare," she groaned. She hastily scanned the crowds lining the harbor; a large crowd of Canterlot upper crust-- who had, typically, pushed their way to the front of the crowds and shoved everyone else back-- were now wearing confetti, streamers, party hats and shell-shocked expressions. Hopefully the plates of cake cannon-blasted into their hooves would placate them.

Spike had taken a peek through the telescope and was now lying on the deck, rolling back and forth and laughing fit to bust. Twilight took back her telescope and took another look. There was a second thundering volley; now it appeared to be raining candy on the lower tiers. Colts and fillies scrambled for the treats. As she watched, one foal got over-eager and reached out under the railing for an elusive piece of candy. Before anyone could move he slipped and fell.
"Oh no!" Twilight's horn flared as the child tumbled off the mountain; could she cast a telekinetic grip that far in time? But before she could summon a spark something pink and winged shot up through the clouds and caught the falling colt. Pinkie flew up and dropped the child back safely on the boardwalk, to cheers and applause.

"Good on ya, Pinkie," Spike shouted. But the pink alicorn had suddenly slipped out of sight-- and was back on the deck of the Surprise, standing next to Luna as if she hadn't moved at all. "Whoa, how'd she--?" Spike started to say.

"I'm starting to see how Pinkie's special gifts can come in handy," Twilight said, amused.

Rarity's ship, the Fabulosity (what else?) slid out of port with grace to match that of her mistress, purple pennants flying. She was on deck, surrounded by her female guard, all of them decked out in Rarity's finest, and glorious as a flock of tropical birds. If the mares in her staff were tropical birds, she herself was a bird of paradise, in a long, shimmering backless gown reminiscent of a cloak of peacock feathers.

Whistles and cheers went up from the highly appreciative male audience. Some of the rougher sort got outright rowdy. One dockworker in particular was making some rather salacious-looking gestures at the girls as the ship floated past, till one of the dainty-looking femmes standing next to Rarity on the forecastle whipped out her hoof and three shurikens embedded themselves in the pillar next to his head.

He abruptly remembered his manners.

The last to leave port was Fluttershy. Her boat, Nature's Child, had little visible ornamentation, though Twilight could see bas-relief work here and there carved and painted to resemble ivy leaves. What made her departure memorable was the accompaniment.

Butterflies. Thousands and thousands of butterflies.

As soon as her ship began to pull out of port, a flock as big as the dirigible itself came out of nowhere and gathered around the vessel, gathering beneath it like a bearing cloud. She stood in the forecastle of her ship, garbed in her Element and a long pink silk gown of Rarity's make, face forward, wings spread to catch the air and sun, as millions of gossamer-winged butterflies escorted her ship from the harbor. A few handfuls fluttered about her, perching on her wings and in her mane before flitting away again to join the throng. "Coos" of wonder followed her out of the harbor and into the sky.

"Now that's somepony who knows how to make an exit," Spike said, lost in admiration.

"I wonder," Twilight said. She turned her telescope back to the port, to where Celestia and Discord still stood. The draconequus was actually waving slightly, an unreadable expression on his face. Then he turned his head and coughed up a few butterflies, pounding his chest with his lion's paw.

Twilight chuckled. "Well how about that."

She folded up her spyglass and turned to find the bo'sun standing behind her. "Captain sez 'At your ladyship's leave,'" he said.

Twilight took a deep breath and looked ahead over the bow. "The word is given," she said. "Set course and full speed ahead. We've got a world to see!"
1) We can only reflect on the irony that, if she did, it would be more than most mares wore in public.

2) A point that miffed Twilight to no end. She knew for a fact that she’d converted no more than a total of 28.5% of the ship for book storage and laboratory work, and she had the figures to prove it.

3) Gryphons, darn it, okay?
Rainbow Dash looked around the room, grinning. She had dreamed of this moment her whole life, and now it was finally happening. Her, teamed up with the Wonderbolts!

Of course, the way it was happening was something she could have never predicted in her wildest dreams. She had expected to be a Wonderbolts cadet, to earn her badge, to fly with them as a rookie and work her way up the ranks to captain someday. She certainly hadn't expected to wake up one morning and find out that she had jumped all the ranks to being their boss. But... well, here she was. An alicorn princess. And here they were, the best fliers in the Wonderbolts--- Soarin, Spitfire, Lightning Streak, Wave Chill and Misty Fly, all in their casual uniforms. Her own personal guard. They were gonna tour all over Equestria and even a couple other nations, doing airshows. And the fact that on top of it they were on a secret mission to, well, change the whole world? Awesome sauce.

She hadn't quite been able to help herself; despite swearing to herself she was going to be cool and professional, she'd promptly started babbling like a fan-filly the moment everypony in the group had filed in. They'd been kind of stiff and formal at all, but she'd figured it was the whole awkward New Alicorn Princess thing. They'd loosen up eventually. She took a deep breath to calm her excited nerves. Geez, where do I begin? "Okay, let's get to it. I called you five in here tonight to talk business.... As you know, I tapped you for this cruise because you're the highest ranking Wonderbolts. The best of the best. And Princess Celestia said to pick the best of the best to be my personal guard. So... welcome aboard." She grinned at the five of them.

She started pacing back and forth. "The five of us are going to be working closely together on this mission that Celestia and Luna sent us on. We're gonna have to work together, to eat together--"

"To sleep together!" Scootaloo chipped in enthusiastically.

Rainbow Dash stumbled over her own hooves in mid stride. "Huh-- whoa-- doy-- now that's not--" she stammered, her pupils like pinpricks.

Scootaloo thought for a second, hoof to her chin. "Nah, maybe not that," she said. "There's not enough room in that bed for all of you. We'd have to stack you like cordwood !"

"Gah, yeah! Exactly," Rainbow Dash said immediately. "Never get any rest that way." She resisted the urge to slap a hoof to her flaming face and shot a death glare at the others, daring them, just daring them to say anything. Wisely, nopony spoke. Dash cleared her throat. "Anyway, what I'm getting at is that you guys are my wingponies now, so I wanna get things off on the right hoof, make sure you're up to speed on the mission--"

"We know about our mission, your Highness," Spitfire said coolly. "We're a military squadron; we're always fully debriefed before we leave base."

Rainbow Dash was taken aback, as much by the coolness of Spitfire's tone as by her formality. "Oh. Well. Good! Of course." She traipsed over to the meeting table on one side of the room. "Well since you all know what I'm up to then I can go ahead to planning out show."

This time it was Spitfire who was taken aback. "...Plan... our show?"

"Yeah," Dash said. She took a rolled flight diagram from Scootaloo and spread it out on the table. "I
gotta get a cork board or something... Anyway, yeah. Gotta plan this out ahead of time for the best results, right? Even a regular plain-vanilla Wonderbolts show needs planning, and with a Firebolt show-- which is me, heh--" she couldn't help strutting a bit "-- it's gotta be extra well thought out." She motioned for the others to gather round, and leaned over the chart. "Okay, I've been thinking this out a lot. If you open with--"

A sun-yellow hoof planted itself in the middle of the chart, interrupting her. Spitfire cleared her throat loudly. "With all due respect, your Highness," she said, "The Wonderbolts team can plot out it's own airshow routine."

"....Right." Dash sheepishly rubbed the back of her head with a hoof. "Didn't mean to step on your tail, there, Spitfire. I know you're their commander." She perked back up. "Heh, gives me an excuse to skip ahead to my routine, anyway--" she bent back over the chart. She started describing, in loving detail, the show routine she'd plotted out: The Super Speed Strut, the Buccaneer Blaze, the Filly Flash "...I figured then would be a good point to pull a couple of laps over the stands, at about twenty feet--"

"Through rings of fire?" Scootaloo asked hopefully, rearing up to plant her hooves on the edge of the table.

"Heh, might get a little toasty for the ponies in the cheap seats, squirt, as low as I'll be flying," she said, giving her assistant a noogie. "But cloud rings should be okay."

"That's awful low to be flying at those speeds," Misty Fly said. Her voice was odd, Dash thought. Was she trying to say something?

"Yeah, but it's kind of necessary--- I want whoever they are to get a good look at me," Dash said. "Besides I'll only be flying at... what? What is it?" Something seemed off about the ponies gathered around her. Everypony had been acting a little funny already but when she'd said that, they all seemed to stiffen a bit. And their faces got absolutely stony.

"Never mind," Spitfire said. "....Your Highness. It's nothing."

"Oookay," Dash said uncertainly. Why was she getting the feeling of a lot of disapproval around here?

A clock on the wall chimed. "Aw nertz," Dash said. "Is that really the time? I knew I spent too long blabbering--" She loosely folded up the chart and slid it to Scootaloo's waiting hooves. "Can we reconvene in, I dunno, a half hour? I got an important Princess-type meeting to take care of, then we can get back together and get this all--"

"There's really no need, your Highness," Spitfire said. "I'm sure whatever routine you work out for your... debut... in Cloudsdale tomorrow will be..." she paused, working her mouth as if the word tasted unpleasant. ".... fine."

Rainbow Dash looked at her. Something about Spitfire's poise had the rainbow alicorn suddenly subdued. "I... okay then. Never mind... I guess you got, um, Wonderbolt leader stuff to do before morning..." she trailed off. "Yeah. Um, Dismissed. I guess?"

As one the five Wonderbolts bowed, stood, and left the room, not even glancing back. Confused, Dash trotted over to the large cabinet standing by the bed and opened it, the doors folding out to reveal a double triptych mirror. She glanced over her shoulder in time to see Spitfire standing in the doorway, watching her. The fiery maned pegasus shook her head to herself and left, the door snapping shut behind her.
Dusk was falling. The crew of Nature's Child were about their business, preparing for the night watch as the newly christened royal dirigible powered its steady way through the darkening skies. Princess Fluttershy's Forest Guard was about its duties as well, the day shift swapping out with the night. In truth there wasn't much for them to do; things didn't get much more secure than aloft in an airship. That didn't stop Captain Snowflake from putting a few of them on duty patrolling the halls of the luxury vessel, or standing watch on the deck. His second-in-command Zephyr wasn't above doing a few turns that night himself. He figured that the troops would be busy enough the next few days and whoever he was replacing would appreciate the extra sleep.

Zephyr made his way up on deck. The cool night breeze ruffled his feathers pleasantly. He took a look around deck, and decided that he would have to reassess the value of his contribution to his troops' well-restedness... seeing as several of the off-duty guards were up on deck, scattered about and trying to look either casually off-duty or uber-professional.

It took him a moment to figure out why. Then he noticed that they seemed to be loitering about in the general vicinity of Princess Fluttershy's cabin door and the penny dropped. He strolled over to where one of the rookies, a blonde-maned unicorn with a pink coat, was leaning on the rail. He was shooting glances over his shoulder at the barring door and looking wistful. The rookie saw him coming and hastily straightened up but Zephyr waved him off. "At ease," he said. "What are you lot doing up on deck, soldier?" He kept his voice amiable, but loud enough for every pony on deck to hear.

The blonde unicorn cleared his throat and flushed. "Well, I can't speak for the others, but I was off duty and thought I might get some fresh air, sir," he said.

Zephyr gave him a half grin. "Fresh air. Mister---"

The rookie nodded. "Golden Aegis. And yes, fresh air, sir."

"And you're hovering around the Princess's door because?"

Zephyr was rewarded by the rookie's face and neck turning red. "J-just in case she-- her Majesty, I mean-- needed anything," he stammered. "Anything at all..." he finished weakly, averting his eyes from his commander... and not coincidentally fixing them on the door of his affection.

Zephyr's half-grin turned into a full one. "And I suppose that goes for the rest of you lot?"

A couple of the guards chuckled. "Kinda," one black and orange pegasus said. "But most of us are here to see what kind of show Mister Chivalry here put on." He pointed at the pink and yellow unicorn, who huffed and turned red but said nothing. Zephyr sighed to himself. Golden Aegis was apparently the would-be White Knight of the group. There was one in every group; some colt who had his head stuffed full of romantic notions of glory and chivalry and Champions of the Fair Maiden and all that.

He tapped Golden Aegis on the shoulder. "Did you consider," he said, not unkindly for a military officer, "that maybe you could be of more service to our Princess if you were well rested for when you are actually on duty?" Golden Aegis stammered a bit then fell silent.
Zephyr shook his head and rolled his eyes. What was it about this mare, alicorn or no, that was turning all his soldiers' brains into mush?

"Um, excuse me?"

Zephyr turned to find the object of his rumination standing in her now-open doorway, limned in lamplight. Her soft mane cascaded around her shoulders. She was clad in a translucent silk nightgown which wafted gently in the night breeze. She looked at him shyly with wide, dewy eyes.

_Oh. Right._ He shut his gaping jaw with a click and saluted hastily. "How may I be of service, your Highness?" he asked.

Her lashes fluttered over her luminous blue eyes and she ducked her head shyly. "I'm terribly sorry to bother you, but I'm afraid I left, um... Angel Bunny's teddy bear down in the hold with my other luggage, and he just can't sleep without it. Would you be so kind as to fetch it for me? If it's not too much--"

Zephyr held up a hoof. "Whatever you need, It is never too much trouble for us, your Highness," he said. _Now where had that come from?_ In amusement he decided to cut the mooning private behind him a break. He glanced back. "Private! Go fetch the Princess's bear from her luggage, would you?"

The rookie barely even paused to salute; he was off in a clatter of hooves and gold painted armor. Zephyr winced at the sound of armor clanging its way down the stairwell. He hoped the fool colt didn't break his own neck in his eagerness.

There was a surprisingly short wait as the recruit made the journey down to the hold and back. Zephyr suspected he had teleported at least once or twice on the way. He could smell the ozone on the rookie's coat. The rookie skidded to a halt in front of the Princess, the plush bear's ribbon in his teeth. He bowed deeply, proffering the toy to her.

"Oh, thank you," she cooed, taking the bear from him. She stood there a moment, smiling, holding the bear in her mouth by the ear. All Zephyr's hindbrain could say was _Hnngh._

"Will there be anything else, Milady?" the hopeful young guard said.

The Princess took the bear in the crook of her foreleg before responding. _Former pegasus, still learning magic, right._ "Oh no, thank you very much, um--"

"Golden Aegis, your majesty," the rookie said with what he obviously hoped was a winning smile. "Golden Aegis," the Princess repeated. "I'm sure, um, Angel Bunny will be very glad to--"

"Sis?" A sleepy voice called. A tousle-headed colt in hoofie pajamas appeared in the doorway rubbing his eyes on his fetlock. "I still can't find Mr. Buttons-- oh there he is!" He took the bear from his sister with a smile. "Thank you, I..." it was only then the young colt noticed the group of stallions standing right outside the door, watching as he accepted a pink plush teddy bear from his sister. He turned beet red and vanished back into the cabin.

Several of the stallions started to chuckle. Fluttershy whipped her head about and shushed them, glaring. "Don't you dare! He'll hear you!" To a stallion they fell silent, swallowing their shortles as if their lives depended on it. "Please don't tease him about the bear," she said, her expression softening. "He's very sensitive..."

"O-of course not. We wouldn't dream of it, your Highness," Golden Aegis blurted out. Similar protestations came from the others.
Zephyr rolled is eyes. "Will there be anything else your Highness?"

"...Anything at all," Aegis added. Zephyr resisted the urge to facehoof.

"No, no. Thank you all, and good night," she said with a smile, backing into her cabin.

The door closed. Aegis sagged in place. "Did I make as big a jackass of myself as I think?" he said woefully.

Zephyr gave him a pat on the back. "Yes, yes you did," he said cheerfully. Aegis groaned. "Gentlemen," Zephyr said to them all, "I'm old but I'm not dumb. I can see you're all smitten with our new Princess; pretty much any colt or stallion who meets her is. Is this going to become a problem?"


"I liked the first answer better, it was more honest," Zephyr muttered. "All right, break it up, you lot. I won't send you to your room like naughty little foals, but I won't have you lurking around the Princess' door like a bunch of Fuller Brush salesmen. She's on the skittish side and needs her privacy. I don't want anyone who isn't on duty within fifty feet of this cabin door, got it?" The guards mumbled acknowledgement.

As they started to disperse, one of them, the stallion who had poked fun at Golden Aegis as it so happened, snorted in amusement to another. "Didja get a load of Little Lord Fauntleroy? That's gonna make the job interesting." The guard shook his head.

The other one chuckled in agreement. "Yeah, poor kid. Already well on his way to being a pretty little pansy."

"Got that right. Two bits says one of us will be escorting him everywhere to keep other colts from making him cry..."

Golden Aegis' reaction surprised Zephyr. The moony rookie obviously heard this and snorted. "Neither of you were at the Junior Gala, were you?" he said.

The other guard looked at him. "No, what of it?"

Zephyr noticed a faint smirk on Aegis' face. Aegis quickly smothered it and addressed the Lieutenant. "SIR, in the interests of royal security, may I suggest that we have somepony teach the young princeling some hoof-to-hoof fighting? Spar with him a bit, that sort of thing..."

The other guardsman took the bait. "Heh, yeah. Be good for him, build some character for little curly-locks." He thumped one hoof in the other for emphasis.

Zephyr picked up his cue. "A capital suggestion," he said to the boisterous rookie. "I assume you're volunteering." It was a statement, not a question.

The black and orange pony blinked, then grinned. "Sure, why not?"

"Excellent," Zephyr said, his face carefully neutral. "You'll start with the colt tomorrow at noon. The rest of you, break it up. You look like a cadet review." The soldiers chuckled and dispersed. Zephyr caught up with Golden Aegis in the stairwell. "Okay, what did I just get Orange Roughy to agree to?"
Aegis' innocent coltish face was split by an absolutely evil grin. "You weren't on duty at the Junior Gala either, sir?"

"No, obviously not," Zephyr said with a bit of impatience. "Get to the point, Aegis."

"I was. That 'pansy' took on three colts twice his size and kicked three kinds of rainbow-colored crap out of them."

Zephyr blinked. He recalled hearing about the disturbance, something about a fight... "You're joking. That was him?"

Aegis nodded. "Even if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, that teddy bear was stuffed in next to a badly battered sparring dummy. I think Orange Roughy is in for a very educational experience tomorrow."

---

**THE NEXT DAY**

The off-duty guards were gathered on the top deck, gathered around a hastily chalked out sparring circle. Orange Roughy was standing in the middle, grinning and motioning for Breezy Shy to join him. The shy little pegasus stepped into the circle, dressed in his Karate gi and wearing his sparring helmet and booties. A few of the guards applauded and shouted encouragement. He curled up a little under all the attention.

"Uh, nice jammies, kid," Roughy said. "Go ahead and lose the booties, wouldja? You're not gonna hurt me."

"But--"

"Go on, lose 'em." Obediently, Breezy shucked his booties and, under further prodding, the padded helmet. Roughy grinned at the waiflike colt and struck a mocking fighting pose. "Okay, kid. Let's start this right. Gimme your best shot!"

CRACK.

That was the last sound Roughy heard for the next hour or two.

"I should probably tell you in advance, your Highness," Captain Grey Wolf said. "My Guards... well, your Guards... are a bit unpolished."

Applejack nodded absently. She was a bit lost in her own thoughts. Despite all the Princesses' best efforts the departure had been a bit of a confused ruckus, and much to the farmpony's chagrin quite a few things had been left half done or slapdashed. She'd hated that as a farmpony, as much as she understood the need for it sometimes, and she didn't care for it any more now as a princess.

One thing in particular left undone, to her embarrassment, had been the christening of her own Guard. That was downright disrespectful of her, and she knew it. These ponies would be protecting her hide and the hides of her family and friends, it wasn't right to leave them hanging, waiting to be acknowledged. She made a noncommittal "hmm" and nodded as the Captain of her Guard continued to speak.
Grey Wolf was a rather burly pegasus pony with a scruffy grey coat and a scar that slashed down over one eye. He was a veteran of several years on the frontier, dealing with hydoras and timberwolves and worse creatures, and more than a fair hoof at dealing with the sort of rough soldiers who got assigned to such duty. As such, he was duly concerned that his new charge was a bit oblivious to what sort of soldiers were working under her. Duties had prevented him from speaking to her in person until now, and his impressions weren't enthusing him. She had been very stiff and formal, and what little she had said had been spoken with a clipped Manehattan accent. He got the unhappy feeling that she wasn't from a background that would prepare her for this.

He stopped in the stairwell. "Highness," he said. "I'm going to be blunt. I've dealt with a lot of soldiers and recruits over the years, and looking at this bunch...This crew is... something of an F-Troop." At her puzzled look he explained. "An Omega Company. A dumping ground for the misfits of the rest of the Guard. Not," he hastened to say, "That they're unfit. But we've gotten more than our share of slightly damaged goods with this lot. Oddballs and one-offs, raw recruits and backwoods hicks, scruffy types from bad backgrounds or transferred from remote posts..."

"Checkered pasts, you're saying," the genteel orange alicorn said.

"...Essentially." Grey Wolf shook his head. "I'm afraid circumstances have left you with a bunch of roughnecks at your disposal." He grinned humorlessly. "Though I shouldn't talk much I suppose. I'm kind of from the dent and scratch sale myself." He ran a hoof down the scar on his face. "They're loyal and all. Just... try not to be too surprised if they're kind of uncultured, your Highness."

"I'll keep that in mind," she said, her face impassive.

Grey Wolf sighed. He'd tried, at least. He pushed open the door leading to the barracks deck and stepped into the common room. His aforementioned scruffy lot were scattered about the room, half in, half out of their armor. Quite a few were gathered around a keg of cider someone had tapped--without permission, he wagered---from the stores, nursing drinks and apparently brooding their fate.

"Princess on deck!" Grey Wolf bellowed. There was a scuffle as a dozen or so soldiers jumped to stand at attention with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

"As you were," a feminine voice behind Grey Wolf said, before he could speak again. Princess Applejack stepped around him and into the middle of the room. "Good evening, my little ponies. I--" she visibly started. "I beg your pardon. My little ponies... and donkeys... and, and is that a diamond dog in back?" she asked faintly.

Scattered around the room was indeed quite an eclectic mix. Ponies of every size and shape, of course, quite a few looking rather rough around the edges. A crystal pony. Two or three batponies, for good measure. A zebra. A rather large male gryphon was standing by the cider keg, mug still in claw. And she was right; a stumpy looking diamond dog with a marked resemblance to a pug was in the back, standing at attention in ill-fitting armor. "You weren't joking when you said it was a mix," she said to Grey Wolf under her breath.

"Ahem. I'm sorry to bother you this late at night, but it seems I was remiss in tending to--" Her eyes swept the room. Her eyes fell on a red earth pony with a yellow-green mane and she halted in mid word. "Cousin Appleseed??" she yelped.

It was like the world came to a screeching halt. The red pony locked eyes with her and his eyes bugged out. "Applejack??"

Without a whoop the prim and proper princess flung herself across the room and wrapped the stallion in a spine cracking hug. "Butter mah biscuits, it IS you!" she said. "Whar in the WORLD have you
been? You missed the reunion!"

"Out on the border, servin' in the Guard, o' course. Applejack, it's really you?" Appleseed said, grinning. "Mah word, ah cain't believe it. You're a Princess?"

"Course I am. Where've you been the past few months?"

"Out past the Crystal Empire, scoutin' out new land fer settlers," Appleseed said. "Don't git much news out thar. Ah thought the fellers was prankin' me, what with their talk o' 'Princess Applejack...'"

Applejack recalled where she was and darted a look around her. Everyone in the room was staring at her with their jaws practically scraping the floor. She seemed to deflate. "Awww, shoot," she said. "Well, so much fer that. Kind of a relief, though. Ah don't think I could keep up that silly Manehattan fru fru for another minute." She looked over at Grey Wolf. "Hail, Captain, just innerduce me around, wouldja?"

Grey Wolf closed his mouth. "Ah... of... course... your Highness?" He shook his head. "You obviously know Appleseed..."

"She oughter," Appleseed snickered. "We fought like cats everytime the family got together. I got more bruises from her than from th' drill sergeant. Girl's mean as a snake."

"Aw, hush up, you." She popped him on the back of the head with a hoof. He just grinned and took it.

"At least we don't have to worry about favoritism," someone quipped. There was laughter all around.

"This is Omari," the captain said, gesturing towards the zebra, who bowed deeply.

"Sakes. Zebras in the Royal Guard?"

Omari stiffened. "Is my being a Zebra a problem?" he asked. His voice was a deep baritone that sent prickles up Applejack's mane.

"Dunno why it would be," Applejack said. "Jest we don't see too many of your folk around at all. Surprisin', is all." She paused. "You wouldn't happen to be related to a zebra mare by the name of Zecora, would you?"

"Of course," Omari said, his voice droll. "Because every zebra in Equestria must be related."

"Mind who you're speaking to, soldier," Grey Wolf said sharply.


Applejack waved it off. "No harm done. Didn't mean to step on your hooves, was just askin'. I suppose it would git annoying if everypony assumed I was related to every pony with an apple cutie mark." She grinned. "Heh. Though most of the time they'd probably be right..."

She paused again. "I just noticed; you ain't talkin' in rhyme like Zecora does."

Omari's eyes went round. "This Zecora, she speaks in rhyme?"

Applejack heroically resisted the urge to say 'yes, yes, all of the time.' "Constantly," she said.

Omari actually backed up a step. "Eeyikes." At Applejack's raised eyebrows, he explained, "Only the zebra shamans speak in rhyme, Majesty."
"Shamans?"

"Scholars, folklorists and herbalists, keepers of powerful knowledge. They travel far from their homelands for many years, studying, finding new lore. They can do things with plants and herbs that—" he shuddered. "Nopony 'befriends' a zebra shaman. They are powerful and capricious, and greatly feared."

"Well I'll give you the greatly feared part," Applejack said with chagrin. "She sure gave me the willies back when we first met. But she's a good friend now. Shoot, she and mah little sister get along just fine."

Omari gaped like she'd sprouted a second head.

"And over here we have Lockheed," Grey Wolf said, gesturing to the the gryphon. The chimera gave a cursory bow and returned his attention to his mug.

Applejack took a sniff. "Is that cider out of the supply I had brought aboard?"

Lockheed ruffled a bit. "No," he said curtly. "I ain't a thief."

"Easy, I weren't sayin' you were... but where'd you get it?"

Lockheed calmed a bit. "I bought a keg when we were still in Canterlot," he said.

Applejack stepped a little closer and sniffed again. "Aww, is that Crabapple Farms cider?" she said with a note of disdain. "Shoot, y'all, pour that stuff out. That's barely fit for drinkin'."

"It ain't bad," Lockheed said, eyeing his mug.

"You kiddin'? They don't age that stuff right and they use their cheapest apples. Then they cover the taste up with mulling spices." She pulled a key out of her mane and handed it off to Appleseed. "Go down in the hold and get us a keg of the good stuff, cuz."

"Oh man-- Sweet Apple Acres cider!" You could almost hear the drool in Appleseed's voice. "I been dreamin' of a glass of that stuff for months."

"Wait. You run Sweet Apple Acres?" the pony who'd spoke said.

"Born and raised," she said, beaming with pride. There were exclamations of surprise and admiration from all around; it seemed that more than a few of her guard were from farm pony backgrounds, and nearly all of them knew about Sweet Apple Acres and the taste of their products.

Lockheed was noncommittal. "Eh, cider's cider," he said. "So long as it's hard."

Applejack gasped and threw a hoof to her forehead, feigning a fit of the vapors. "Ah! Sacrilege!" she said in her Manehattan accent. The guards chuckled. "Sorry, sugarcube, no hard cider this time." Lockheed looked disgruntled and there were a few disappointed 'awws' in the crowd.

"Don't be that way," the cider aficionado said. "You taste this stuff, you won't care!" Skepticism greeted this remark.

Appleseed reappeared, rolling a keg of Sweet Apple Acres' finest ahead of him. Lockheed and the
Diamond Dog set the keg up and tapped it. Applejack pulled the first mug and handed it to Lockheed, to his surprise. "Let's see what our cider cynic has to say," she said.

Lockheed took a pull on his mug. His eyebrows climbed up his forehead. He took a longer pull, draining the stein to the bottom and gave a satisfied sigh.

"Well?" Applejack said.

"Like liquid gold," he said reverently. A round of cheers went up and mugs began to be passed forward. Soon every hoof, paw and claw was holding a mug of good cheer.

Once the Princess had a hoof wrapped around a stein, Grey Wolf continued his introductions. "These are the Nightshade triplets," he said, introducing her to the three batponies. "Sister and two brothers. Joined the Guard together..."

The next hour Applejack spent chatting, joking and getting to know her guardsmen, and generally feeling more at ease than she had in a good while. Grey Wolf was right; those that weren't raw half-trained recruits were ponies (or others) with colorful pasts that would have made them less than popular, to put it kindly, with certain career-minded commanders and appearance-minded royalty and nobility. But she found that they suited her just fine. Rednecks, roughhousers, ponies who didn't know the meaning of putting on airs, and had never come within a mile of it.

In a word... honest.

The festive air wound down a bit, finally, and she recollected herself. "Aw shoot, I almost forgot why I came down here with y'all in the first place," she said. She drained the dregs of her mug and set it down so she could stand in front of them. "In all the rush to get us out of port, I plumb forgot to christen the Guard. I figger we better get this taken care of afore we get to port."

She hesitated, her smile fading a bit. "I'm sorry, y'all," she said. "I know you fellers volunteered for this, hopin' to get another Celestia." She looked down at herself. "'Fraid I ain't up to that."

"We wouldn't have it any other way," one of the rookies said. "Your Highness." He grinned.

"Aye," the diamond dog grunted. "Better to have a Princess who herself. After all, we gotta be ourselfs." He shot the last of his mug down his throat.

"You're certainly one up on them," Lockheed said.

"Yeah. Most Canterlot toffs woulda took one look at us and run the other way," one of the donkeys said. Everyone laughed.

"You are your true self with us, and you don't mind that we're ourselves with you," Grey Wolf said. "It will be an honor to serve." He bowed. All around the room the scruffy guardsponies-- and griffons, zebras, donkeys and diamond dogs-- bowed as well.

Applejack felt her cheeks redden. "Sakes." She decided to break out the Canterlot accent just one more time. She extended her wings, fanning them out, and stepped to where Grey Wolf knelt. "Then with honor we dub thee.." she lowered her horn and touched it to the blank disk on his breast. She dimpled.

"The Roughnecks."

The disc sparkled; a copy of Applejack's cutie mark appeared. All around the room discs on armor glowed as the symbol appeared. Grey Wolf got to his hooves and saluted with a cocky grin. He
picked up his mug and raised it. "To Princess Applejack!" he said.

"Hooaaaah!" Mugs raised all over the room. Applejack felt her cheeks go as red as one of her apples.

She glanced up at the clock on the wall. "Oh spit on a griddle!" She swore. "Sorry, fellers but ah gotta run. Ah'm late f'r a meeting." She turned and galloped for the door. "I'll see y'all in the mornin'. Enjoy the cider!" Cheerful farewells and wishes for a good night followed her out the door.

Grey Wolf chuckled and turned to his men. "And that, gentlemen, is our Princess," he said.

Applejack galloped up the stairs to the top deck and to her cabin door. The two guardsmen standing watch saluted. "Take a powder, fellas," she said. "There's cider down in the barracks fer everyone. Go git yerself some while it lasts."

The two grinned, but one went to fetch them both a mug while the other stayed at his post. Smart thinkin', Applejack thought as she dashed inside.

Babs and Applebloom were both asleep on the enormous bed. They had apparently conquered the treacherous mattress and were sleeping atop a raft of pillows, curled up around each other. Applejack chuckled at the sight. She opened the cabinet standing at the foot of the bed, revealing the mirrors inside. She crawled up on the foot of the bed herself, careful not to disturb the sleeping fillies and looked into the mirrors. Five familiar faces looked back at her; five hooves waved.

"Hey, girls," she said to her friends. "Let's git this first meeting underway."
"...Ah dunno, Y'all. I get the feelin' Celestia was tryin' to send me some kind o' racial tolerance message with the mix o' guards she gave me." The others chuckled heartily.

The six of them were gathered together. Technically. In truth they were all separated by hundreds of miles, but it was easy to forget with Twilight's magic mirrors. They were each sprawled in front of their own double triptych of mirrors, relaxing as they chatted with their friends' reflections. It was almost like being in the same room with them.

"Well, there was that whole incident with Zecora," Rarity pointed out, almost apologetically. The fussy fashionista was wrapped in a towel, sprawled out on a massage bench while two mares-- one lavender and pink, one pink and lavender-- worked her wings and back over with a massage. "You didn't exactly come off well during that. And, well, darling, you do come from something of an, um, insular background..."

Applejack bridled at the implied slur. "Jest because ah got a farmer's accent, you think that means I'm some sort o' racist?? Who's bein' the bigot now? Ah didn't get upset 'cause Zecora was a zebra. I was skeered of her because she was dog-gone creepy! Even other zebras are jittery of her! Sides, I don't recall you all exactly covering yourselves in glory when Zecora first came a-callin'--"

"Oh calm down, Applejack," Rarity said, lifting the cucumber slice off one eye to glare at her friend. "I'm just saying that you don't exactly come from a well-traveled background, and Celestia thought having a more mixed Guard might help you adjust to exotic company. You do get on with them, don't you?"

Applejack settled down, mollified. "Fair enough, I suppose. Yeah, we do seem to be hittin' it off. Frankly I'm more at ease with them than with alla them chambermaids and what not."

Twilight suddenly looked curious. "What was that about Zecora making other zebras jittery?"

Applejack chuckled and told her about Omari and his little revelation about Zecora's social niche. Twilight tapped her chin and hmmmed, intrigued. "Fascinating. Zecora never mentioned it, but I guess it would explain why she wasn't terribly put out by ponies being skittish around her. She's probably used to it." She shook her head. "Surprising, though. I had no idea we had any zebras at all in the Guard."

"How would you know?" Pinkie asked innocently. She was sprawled on her belly in front of her mirror munching her way through an enormous tub of popcorn and, for some reason, was wearing a pair of cardboard 3-d glasses.

"What do you mean?" Fluttershy asked.

"Well, they all wear those magic armors that change their colors, right?" Pinkie said. "so they all look white or grey. So if you can't see their stripes, how would you know?"

Twilight blinked. "She has a point."

Pinkie tapped her chin in thought. "Hey Twilight-- if a zebra doesn't have any black stripes OR any white stripes, do they turn invisible?"
"Aaaand there it went," Twilight said, deadpan. The others giggled. "So how are the rest of you getting on with your staff and guard?"

"Oh fabulously, darling, fabulously," Rarity said. "Oh, allow me to introduce my two ladies-in-waiting.." she gestured to the two masseuse ponies.

"They look like Aloe and Lotus," Fluttershy said, surprised.

"No, dear, though I did make the offer to them," Rarity said. "These are Lavender and Rosemary, Aloe and Lotus' cousins." She smiled knowingly. "Twins run in the family."

"Figures. Rarity can't go to the spa? She brings the spa with her," Rainbow Dash quipped.

Rarity pouted at the others' snickers. "I'll have you know that I provide spa services to all the ponies on my staff," she said. "Not just myself. Not that I don't deserve it."

"All of them? Your guards are going to be the most pampered ponies on the planet," Twilight chuckled.

"But of course, darling." Rarity lifted a cucumber to give Twilight a knowing look. "You treat your staff well, your staff treats you well. And they most certainly earn their keep. Why, just their service modeling my fabulous new dresses makes them worth their weight in gold. Though I do have to make modifications to them for their personal use," she mused. "I have no idea how I managed to hide fifteen stilettos and a garotte in that Little Black Dress I made for Marigold. You know the darling thing cried when I gave it to her? She said it was the nicest thing anyone ever made for her, the poor dear."

"Well..." Twilight said, at a loss for words. "That's... certainly something."

"And of course they all look fabulous in them. Like I said, worth their weight in gold, even if they hadn't karate chopped Prince Blueblood for getting fresh." She replaced the cucumber and laid back down.

"Karate chop?"

"Prince Blueblood?"

"Yes, yes," Rarity sighed. "Since my course is going to be through several foreign lands, there are a few Equestrian diplomats squirreled away on board. Prince Blueblood managed to wheedle his way into a berth. The dolt figures he can salvage his courtly influence by courting me, it seems. He got into the vin ordinaire one night and tried to make a pass at me. Marigold and Jade Blossom taught him the error of his ways of course. He was up and about the next day, though he hasn't walked the same since then... what?" The alicorn fashionista discarded the cucumbers entirely and looked at her friends, sincerely puzzled. Her friends, for their part, were staring at Rarity with seriously disturbed expressions.

"So!" Twilight said with forced cheeriness. "How about you, Pinkie?"

"Oh, supeiffic," the party alicorn said. "It's funny, though. They're all big and muscle-y like Big Macintosh. And they all talk--" she struck a muscle-pony pose. "--Lahk dees! ARRRH. GET IN DE CHOPPAH!!"

"They're all Hosstrian?"

Pinkie shrugged. "Nah, they just all talk that way. They're nice though. But Lulu is sort of having
troubles because of them..."

"...And this is Hans and his brother Frans!" Pinkie said cheerfully, standing between the two at the end of the line of ponies.

"Hallo, Preecess Loona," the enormous black stallion said. "Akchooly, I am Frans--" 

"Und I am Hans," his snow white brother said. "Ve ah honuhd to serve." He took Luna's hoof in his own and kissed it chivalrously.

Luna gaped as she stared up-- Up! at the massively muscular earth pony Guard. Ye gods, he was almost as tall as Celestia! Powerful muscle rippled under his gleaming white coat. His massive hoof dwarfed her own. Yet he wasn't clownishly distorted like Captain Snowflake, back on the Nature's Child. No, Hans was cut from the same cloth as Princess Applejack's older brother; carrying his powerful muscles on a frame suited to their size. His brother was no different, only he came in jet black to Hans' gleaming white.

Luna didn't stand a chance. The fierce and untamed world of a thousand years ago had conditioned her at the marrow to crave a stallion who looked like he could take a warhammer to the chest without flinching. Hans and Frans, like every other stallion in the Bouncer Brigade, fit the bill and then some.

Remember your oath, she frantically thought. No mortal stallions. No mortal stallions. No. No. You can not haz beefcake. Must wait until the Panacea is found. NO MORTAL STALLIONS.

"Woof," she said.

Hans' and Frans' eyebrows rose. Mercifully, before Luna could begin drooling, Pinkie spoke up. "I think she means 'welcome.' Welllll, maybe you and the others should go ahead and go, I'm sure you have all sorts of guardsy type stuff to do..." Pinkie ushered the guards out the door. She leaned out the door, waving goodbye to the guards. Luna galloped to her side, sticking her head out the doorway to gawk as they marched off. Pinkie looked up at her mentor. "Well, whaddya think?"

Luna whimpered faintly. An entire ship full of rugged, muscular stallions, hoof-picked by Celestia for their possibly years-long mission. "I think my sister is evil, evil, evil," she said.

"And then she sort of started crying and ran off and had three cold showers and two tubs of double fudge ripple," Pinkie finished, her eyes alarmingly sober. "Not the ice cream-- just the ripple. The dessert chef was really mad."

"Oh the poor dear," Rarity said sympathetically, between gales of laughter. "Would that we all had such troubles..."

"It sounds like Celestia's trying to pressure her into giving up that 'no mortals' dating policy of hers," Twilight said. "Oh, Celestia..." she sighed, shaking her head. She would have said more but some part of her had to agree with Celestia's motives. "She'll be fine, Pinkie Pie. She probably just needs to regain her composure. How about you, Fluttershy? Anything to report?"

"Oh, no," Fluttershy said, smiling. "Everything is going fine. My guards are all sweethearts. And so good with the animals! Oh, there was that little accident with Bishi's sparring practice, but nopony
was seriously hurt and the ship's dentist says that he can fix up the guardpony's teeth good as new."

"Wait. What?"

A brief but painful description of Orange Roughy's learning experience soon had the girls rolling on the floor. Even Fluttershy couldn't help giggling at the memory of the guard's utterly stunned face when he'd regained consciousness and realized what had happened. In the midst of the merriment, Fluttershy noticed that Rainbow Dash's laughter seemed... strained. "Is something wrong, Rainbow Dash?"

"Huh? Oh, uh, not really," Dash said. "Nuthin' I can't handle. Really."

This drew Applejack's attention, as well as a raised eyebrow. "Uh huh," she said. "Pull the other one, it has bells on. What's up?"

"Indeed, Rainbow dear," Rarity said. "One doesn't need to be the alicorn of Honesty to see that something is eating at you."

"You can tell us-- we're you're friends!" Pinkie said.

Rainbow hesitated, biting her lip. "It's really nothing, it's just-- well, the Wonderbolts have been kinda, I dunno, stiff. All cold and formal and stuff around me. I dunno, I just get this vibe off them that..." she let her voice drop. "That they don't respect me. Or even like me."

"Well why ever would they not?" Rarity said. She wasn't oblivious to her friend's rougher edges, but if there was any group of ponies a pegasus-- well, former pegasus, Rarity corrected herself mentally-- like Rainbow Dash should fit in with, a bunch of daredevils like the Wonderbolts would be that group, she should think.

"They're probably just still uncertain about how to act around you, Dash," Twilight said, trying to be reassuring. "I mean, new princess and all. They're probably just trying to get used to you."

"You think that's it?" Dash said uncertainly.

"Absolutely," Twilight said, smiling confidently. "I'm sure that after you fly together at Cloudsdale tomorrow and they have a feel of what sort of pony you are, you and they will get along fine."

"I hope you're right," Rainbow Dash muttered.

"And maybe," Applejack said, "just maybe you're seein' more than is there?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, sugarcube, maybe you're just feelin' a little guilty about jumpin' ahead of 'em? I mean one day you're a cadet at their flight camp, the next day you're wearin' a crown and givin' em orders."

"Yeah there is that," Rainbow Dash murmured. "I've kinda been trying to avoid thinking about all that. If I let myself, then it gets all weird. And that's no good either..."

"Awww, don't worry, Rainbow Dash," Pinkie said. "Everything's going to be perfectly fine!" She leaned through the mirror and gave Rainbow Dash a quick hug before settling back in her seat.

The others gawked. "Gnurk?" Twilight managed to say.

Pinkie sat back down on her cushion in her own ship. Rainbow Dash carefully tapped on the mirror. Yup. Solid. "We're going to have to get used to this sort of thing, aren't we?" she said.
"Pinkie, how long have you been able to do that?" Rarity said faintly.

"About five seconds," Pinkie said.

"Please, just... just don't do it again, okay?" Twilight begged, rubbing her temples with her hooves.

Pinkie looked at the mirror, head cocked at an angle. "Eh, it's okay, Twily," she said. "It won't happen again. The Maybe Not has turned orange, so I can't do it anyway."

Twilight's mouth opened and closed a couple of times, but she made no sound. "Okay," she said finally. "Fine, great." She shook her head. "Anyway, Rainbow-- don't worry. It's just a matter of adjustment. We've all got a lot to get used to." She waved her hoof, indicating Pinkie Pie. "Case in point."

Rainbow Dash gave a hesitant laugh. "Okay. Yeah. You're probably right. I'm... sure it will work out." I hope, she added silently.

"And what about you, Twi?" Applejack said. "You gettin' along well with your bunch?"

To the other's surprise, the purple alicorn blushed. "Um, yes, of course," she said, clearing her throat. "The servants are all very professional, and I have four maidservants who help me with all the personal preparations. I'll be meeting with the staff of scholars I picked when we arrive in Manehattan tomorrow, but they seem nice enough."

"And your Guard?"

"Are... very professional," Twilight evaded. "Their captain is Flash Sentry."

"What's he like?" Pinkie asked innocently. Twilight turned very red but said nothing.

"Ohohoho," Rarity crowed. "Our little Twilight's all grown up now. She's discovered boys!"

Twilight could do nothing but bury her flaming face in her cushion as her friends squealed in glee. She surfaced for air as the teasing and giggles died down. "It's not like that," she insisted with great dignity.

A chorused "Uh huh" answered her. She buried her face again.

"Is he nice?"

"Is he cute?" This to everypony's surprise came from Fluttershy.

There was a pause. "Yes," came Twilight's muffled reply. She raised her head. "Okay, yes. He's cute." A smile dimpled her cheeks. "He's very handsome, actually. And very smart, according to his dossier he's a graduate of Wing Point."

"Ooohh," Rarity said. "I can see why that attracts you."

"And not just book smart, either," Twilight went on. "He got promoted to Captain due to his fast thinking; some heroic action in the Crystal Empire thwarting some would-be spy or saboteur." This seemed to impress the others considerably. "I... haven't had much time to talk with him, but he seems very charming." She clip-clopped her forehooves together, beaming. "We are going to work so well together!"
The six alicorn princesses all had very specific destinations in mind, each according to a different strategy. While those itineraries at first glance were trivial and impulsive, and a thin excuse for the new royalty to indulge in a lavish vacation, there was in fact a strategy to it all. If anything, the fact that their itineraries could have passed as a royal indulgence to a casual observer was half the strategy itself. They were stalking a very timid and skittish quarry, after all, and disguising their intent till the last second was vital.

They had the alicorn detection spell, but that spell was very limited. It would see through any disguise, pierce any veiling, - but it would only indicate the general presence of a hidden alicorn or nascent alicorn within a mile or so, and it was only useful to indicate actual direction within a few hundred feet.

Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash had hit on rather similar solutions. There were a lot of ponies to sort through just to find one alicorn or one potential, so they were going to go out and meet a lot of ponies.

Rainbow Dash's Wonderbolt tour was, in her eyes, a stroke of brilliance. Ponies of every tribe gathered by the thousands to watch a Wonderbolts show; she would be able to sweep crowds of tens of thousands with the 'detecto-spell' at every show as she and the others flew overhead. Cloudsdale was her first stop, and the testing ground for her theory.

Pinkie Pie's plan, while more festive, meant the same thing. She and Luna going to hit Maredi Gras, Carnival, the New Years party at Manehattan,... every big celebration on the Equestrian calendar and every little one in between, scanning the teeming crowds for the elusive nascents even as they partied down. For that matter if history was anything to go by, she was going to be at the center of the party the moment she arrived.

Applejack and Fluttershy, however, were operating under a different assumption. They were of the opinion that alicorns and nascents would be reclusive, much as Celestia and Luna had been when they first manifested. Applejack was of the mind that an alicorn would retreat to a more rural setting, where ties were close and privacy was a must.... "And let's be fair, where there ain't likely to be too many unicorn eggheads to spot 'em," she'd admitted. Her trail took her to the small towns, farming communities and hometown harvest festivals. Her first stop was Cherry Jubilee's Cherry Jubilee at Dodge Junction.

Fluttershy on the other hand felt that they would be even more reclusive, hiding out in the wilderness where few if any ponies ventured. She intended to search the remote corners of the world, nature preserves and national parks and places known for their isolation and paradise-like beauty.... and for rumors and ghost stories about strange ponies who lived therein. Winsome Falls and the Unicorn Range were her first stop, followed by Hollow Shades. She would allegedly be visiting with the park rangers, and attending a Foal's Scouts Jamboree... but would be spending a fair amount of time exploring the hills and forests for sign of the alicorns' hidden kin.

If Fluttershy was going about her part of the search following her own biases, Rarity could be forgiven for engaging in a little projection herself. "After all, after a few centuries one would tend to accumulate considerable wealth and influence," she had argued. "And what would be the point of that? To pile it up in a cave someplace? Ah, no offense, Spikey Wikey. No, I see an alicorn becoming quite comfortable over time-- perhaps as an eccentric millionaire recluse?"

"I can hardly argue," Celestia had said with wry amusement, "Seeing as I've lived in a palace for over a millennium."
So it seemed that Rarity would be going the more traditional route for royalty; hob-nobbing with high society and the *nouveau riche*, discreetly searching for those who perhaps had a bit more to hide than mere indiscretions or family scandals. She had chosen Neigh Orleans (famous for its gentrified upper class) as the first leg of her tour, to be followed by Mareis, Prance (the city of lights, epicenter of world high fashion) and Applewood (the playground of the rich and famous, actors and moviemakers.)

As for Twilight, she was taking a more circuitous route to her goals. Rather than sweep the cities searching for alicorns or nascents, or searching the forests and hills for some hidden alicorn sanctuary, she was instead touring the facilities of knowledge and learning scattered throughout Equestria; the universities, the museums, the research laboratories. And, not so coincidentally, touching base with the various ponies scattered throughout who were conducting research at Celestia’s behest into alicornism and immortality. Even if their research was currently fruitless, she might learn something that would help. And wouldn't an ascended alicorn gravitate to such places, to learn to control their new powers, in an effort to understand their own condition?

Her first port-of-call, therefore, was Manehattan, where she would be taking an exhaustive tour of the museums and scientific institutes that called the city home— including a small, unobtrusive hospital sitting on the very outskirts of the sprawling city, where certain types of obscure and abstract medical research were taking place...

And meanwhile, Celestia, Cadence and Shining Armor would put their own efforts towards searching both Canterlot and the Crystal Empire.

They had their magic. They had their teams. They had their loyal siblings and sidekicks. They had their fully stocked and equipped airships. They had the tools, they had the talent... they had the *plan*.

There’s a famous saying in the military about plans. In this case there wasn’t even an enemy to encounter.
Twilight's eye twitched silently. Things had been going so well. She had gotten up early; her hoofmaidens had gotten her groomed, breakfasted, and prepared for the day; she and Spike had sent off the day's mail and organized her master list; she had distributed copies of her twenty-part bullet list for the day's agenda to the servants, the small staff of research ponies she had picked for the trip, and the ship's crew from the captain all the way down to the cabin colt, and had proceeded down to discuss the day's schedule with her new Captain of the Guard.

It was at that point that her carefully ordered world had begun to lose altitude, warning signals blaring from the cockpit...

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" she repeated.

"I said I haven't made a schedule for today, your Highness," Flash Sentry said.

"Why not??" Twilight said, with the air of somepony asking another why they hadn't bothered to eat or sleep. "How can you possibly get anything done? How can you prepare the security detail for the tour of the Manehattan museum today or the--"

Flash Sentry tapped his head, or rather his helmet, with a hoof. His golden helmet dinged. "I keep it all up here," he said. "Just a general plan. No sense in writing everything out. Things can change too fast." He huffed in amusement. "I mean, its not like I can plan out your day with a giant checklist. That would be ridic..." his voice trailed off as he looked over her shoulder. The princess's stubby dragon assistant was standing back out of her line of sight, silently hefting a paper scroll nearly as tall and as thick around as he was in his arms and eyeing him meaningfully.

Flash met his basilisk gaze and shook his head in disbelief.

The dragonling nodded slowly and emphatically. Flash cleared his throat and returned his attention to the princess. "My apologies, your highness," he said. "I'll... have something on your desk as soon as possible."

Twilight tried to laugh breezily. It didn't quite come off. "Oh well, it's not like that puts us... too far behind schedule," she said, smiling stiffly. She let out a little laugh. "I'll just... move back the first five items on my morning sub-checklist in, um, an hour? Yes, an hour should be plenty of time for you to give me an itemized writeup of the Guard's schedule for today. Right?" She turned around to leave. "Come along, Spike..."

"Oh, hey, Twilight, maybe I should stay here and help him?" Spike said suddenly. "I mean, Number One Assistant, right? I know how you like things organized and I can help him get it written out the way you like."

"Good thought, Spike," she said. "You stay here and help Captain Sentry. I still have a few more ponies to meet with before we dock. Just let me make a duplicate of the master list..." Her horn glowed; another scroll equal to the size of the first appeared. "Okay! I've got a few more of the staff to consult with and correlate our itineraries. I'll leave you two to it." With that, she turned and trotted out of the room.

Flash looked at Spike. Spike looked at Flash. "I'm sure she's just... nervous," Flash said, regarding the scroll in Spike's arms. "Overplanning to compensate." There was a note of fading hope in his
Shaking his head, Spike stepped over and rested a claw on the Captain of the Guard's shoulder. "Dude, there's a few things you need to know about your new boss..." he said sympathetically.

"And now--- opening for the WONDERBOLTS: Princess Rainbow Dash, Equestria's first FIREBOLT!" The cheering was there, but it was more what Rainbow Dash thought of 'polite' cheering. That 'okay, you're here, now impress us' sort of cheering when a new show opened. Some were applauding because she was their new Princess; some were maybe a touch more enthusiastic because she was a Cloudsdale native and a former pegasus-- 'one of them.' But it was still way more reserved than Rainbow Dash really liked.

Well, she was about to change that.

She flew up through the center of the Cloudiseum escorted by four Wonderbolts. The instant they peeled away in a bomburst, she poured on the speed, rocketing skyward. At a thousand feet she hit the sound barrier, and a Sonic Rainboom exploded over Cloudsdale.

That oughta get their attention, Dash thought smugly. ...wherever they are. She stalled out and then pulled a corkscrew dive to the stadium far below. The cheering--- mad-awesome cheering-- rose to meet her. She slalomed through the cloud pillars down the center of the floating coliseum, then pulled out into a Super Speed Strut along the rim of the stadium, right in front of the lowest seats. Squeals and shouts of surprise trailed behind her; few if any noticed that the alicorn's horn was glowing vividly as she raced by, completing a full circuit.

Nothin'.

She pulled a Cuban Eight and switched directions, this time flying through cloudhoops set along the top rim of the Cloudiseum, right above the nosebleed seats. Her tailwind was so fierce that the hoops burst apart as she passed through them, swirling off in eddies of mist. The fans short on bits got an unexpected thrill, for sure. She saw bluecollar stallions and mares with their colts and fillies, cheering and applauding like mad.

Still not what I'm lookin' for.

She switched out to a high and tight lazy eight, swooping back and forth across the Cloudiseum, pulling near-stallout turns at each of the private viewing boxes, lighting up the clouds around her as she pumped more power into her horn. The cloudsdale elite nearly jumped out of their skins; she heard more than one noblemare (and at least one noblestallion) shriek in alarm as she seemed to come within mere inches of smashing through the glass and falling into their laps. She chuckled to herself even as she flew past.

Aaaand... nothin'.

She flew a final barrel roll the length of the Cloudiseum, flew up to the Royal box, and alighted as gently as a feather, the roar of the crowd below deafening. She held the pose for a moment with her wings flared, smiling for the crowds and the cameras, then took her seat on the royal lounge chair. Scootaloo was standing next to it, bouncing up and down and practically vibrating with excitement. "That was awesome, Rainbow D-- I mean Princess!" the orange filly said.
Dash chuckled and gave her a quick noogie. "We aim to please, kid," she said, picking her up and planting her on the cloud-couch next to her.

Scootaloo leaned in close. "Find anything?" she whispered.

Dash grimaced and shook her head. "Nothin'," she said. "Complete disappointment, kiddo."

Scootaloo sighed. "Nuts. I was kinda hoping we'd do better the first time out."

"Yeah, I know. Well... better luck next time," Dash said. "Might as well sit back and enjoy the airshow for now," Scootaloo nodded. The two turned their attention back to the stadium, where the team was pulling off a gorgeous double overtake. They never even noticed the expressions lingering on the faces of the two Wonderbolts standing honor guard with them.

The next hour went by quickly. The new show was a hit. The newly coronated Princess Dash finished off the show with another sonic rainboom, this one a triple-burst-- passing back and forth through the center of her own sonic boom, making a triple ring shockwave. The crowds ate it up.

That wasn't the end, though. After a quick clean up and trading her flame-decaled tights for her torc, gold sandals and laurel leaves, she was at the head of a ticker tape parade from the Cloudiseum gates to City Hall, right through the center of Cloudsdale. Dash certainly gave her wingpony guards a workout; she was everywhere, flitting back and forth across the thoroughfare to shake hooves and give out autographs and pose for pictures, diving in to hover side by side with her teammates as they did their usual meet-and-greets with the fans along the parade route.

The parade ended at city hall, with the mayor there to give the newest Princess-- "A filly right out of our own town--" a welcome befitting Equestrian royalty; a new permanent cloudsculpture of the Mane Six.(1) The finishing touch was when the mayor presented her with an honorary diploma from the flight school she had dropped out of.

She managed to ramble out a short thank-you speech that she hoped didn't sound too lame. For lack of anything else to say she finished with "Stay in school, kids!" and held up the diploma for all the flashing cameras.

She winced from the lights, rubbing her head. She caught a glimpse out of the corner of her eye of the Wonderbolts lined up behind her. They were trying to be stone faced, but even she couldn't miss the sour turn of their mouths.

---

The scene in the locker rooms back aboard the Thunderstruck was terse, to say the least. The mood of the 'bolts showering up ranged from unhappy to disgruntled to outright fuming. There wasn't a 'bolt there who didn't have a bitter comment to make.

"...And did you get that 'stay in school' line?" Silver Lining snorted, tossing her towel in the laundry hamper. "A Flight School dropout getting a free diploma. Great message, there."

"Guys," Fire Streak said as he changed into a clean uniform, "She's a princess, you know. You'd better watch what you say."

"Won't change what's true. She got everything given to her wrapped up in a big ol' ribbon. She finds some old magic jewelry, gets caught in some weird unicorn explosion, and gets it all in one go--- Alicornhood, princesshood, the leader of the Wonderbolts---"
"Owner of the Wonderbolts, you mean," Wavechill snarked, slamming his locker. "We're nothing but dress-up dolls for her now. So she can go out and play at being a Wonderbolt herself. What a privileged brat."

"Got that right," Misty Fly muttered. "You know she had Lightning Streak run back to the ship halfway through the show? She needed someone to feed her pet turtle."

Silver Lining rolled her eyes. "Five bits says she has him giving it walkies around town," she snickered.

"What, and miss a chance to be in front of the cameras?" High Winds growled. "That ego hog?"

"Yeah, face it," Star Flash said. "We're stuck playing babysitter and backup band for a lazy spoiled brat who didn't earn a single thing she's been--"

The locker room door banged open. Everypony in the room turned around. Standing in the doorway was Princess' little orange sidekick. She had a clipboard under one wing and her winged baseball cap on her head and an expression on her face none of them would ever forget.

"You-- you--" speechless, the filly angrily kicked the towel cart she'd been pushing into the locker room and bolted.

Silver Lining spoke for them all. "Ahh, crap."

"Told ya," Fire Streak said with mock cheerfulness.

Rainbow Dash was in her room, talking to a tortoise.

"I don't know what to do, Tank," the rookie princess said morosely. She was leaning on the side of Tank's terrarium, her forelegs dangling down inside to pat the Gallop-agos tortoise on his wrinkly head. "I thought this was my dream come true, you know? Me and the Wonderbolts, working together. The only way that could be more awesome is if Daring Do decided to sign up, right? But-- they're all stiff and cold and they stop talking the minute I walk in the room... and... the way I catch some of them looking at me... Like I'm this big jerk--"

She looked worried. "Am I a big jerk? Am I screwing up again? I'm not cruising for another Mare Do Well, am I?"

Tank nudged her dangling hoof with his head affectionately. Dash smiled a little. Good old Tank; loyal to a fault. It made things a little better with him in her corner... made her forget that nagging horn-ache-- was that a word? She'd have to ask Twilight-- that she'd been feeling ever since the voyage had started out.

The door burst open. Scootaloo came tumbling in. Rainbow Dash hastily stood up, wiping her face and trying to look cool. "Hey, squirt, where's the fire?"

Scootaloo looked up at Dash. Her cheeks were flushed red and she was chuffing like a steam engine. The look on her face was an eloquent mix of shock, disbelief, heartbreak, anger, and betrayal. "Rainbow Dash--- you won't believe what I heard the Wonderbolts saying--!"
An hour later, Spitfire walked into Rainbow Dash's quarters. She had changed into her dress uniform, complete with her aviator sunglasses; it hadn't taken her long to get word from the other 'Bolts about Dash's little orange eavesdropper; she figured on getting one hell of a dressing down and dressed accordingly. The door clicked shut behind her. "You wanted to see me, Your Highness?" She said.

Rainbow Dash didn't look at her. She had her back turned to Spitfire, and was looking out the ornate windows that faced out the stern of the zeppelin, apparently watching the Cloudsdale skyline. She didn't say anything for a minute. Spitfire was too professional to fidget. "You're their Captain, Spitfire," the alicorn princess said, her raspy voice surprisingly quiet. "So tell me. For all of you."

"What is your problem with me?"

Spitfire growled inwardly. Her Royal Highness had gotten her royal feelings hurt, it seemed. Oh joy. This was going to make this gig just wonderful. "I'm afraid you're going to have to be a little more specific than--"

Princess Dash spun around and stamped her forehooves on the teakwood floor. "Oh cut the crap, Spitfire!" She barked. "I may not be the smartest Bearer in the Elements of Harmony, but even I can't miss the dirty looks the other 'Bolts are shooting at me when they think I'm not looking." She started pacing in a tight circle in front of the Wonderbolts captain. "I didn't miss the way everyone shuts up and gets all frosty around me, or how when I walk into the room, they all start walking out. Or the way you get all prissy when I talk to you," she added the last scathingly. "And now I get word that you're are all sitting around the locker room talking smack about me!"

"I'll have the ones responsible disciplined--" Spitfire started.

Dash stamped her hooves again. "I said cut the crap!" She stopped pacing and got up in Spitfire's face. "I don't want your 'discipline,' I want answers! I want you to look me in the eye and tell me the truth! So I'm gonna ask again, what is your and your team's major malfunction?"

Spitfire's face flushed hot red. "Permission to speak freely?" She asked, her teeth clenched. "Did I stutter?" Dash retorted. "Spit it out!"

Spitfire glared at her and dropped her pretense. "You want to know what's wrong, Princess?" she said. "You don't deserve a thing you've been given, that's what. You're a pampered, reckless, irresponsible, inconsiderate, grandstanding showoff who got handed everything you have on a silver platter. You abused your crown to get your pretty little place, and you made a mockery of everything the Wonderbolts stood for by writing yourself into the top slot. And every pony in the 'Bolts can't stand you because every pony in the Bolts who looks at you just gets a reminder of how worthless all their hard work and sacrifice is." She kicked at the Firebolt costume that lay wadded up on the floor. "You don't deserve that crown and you sure as heck don't deserve to be a Wonderbolt, much less a 'Firebolt,' " she added, making quote marks in the air with her hooves.

Her Royal Highness had obviously not been expecting all that. She stood gaping at Spitfire like she'd been slapped. "Reckless? Irresponsible? Pampered?? Where do you get off with that??"

"Oh please, Dash," Spitfire snorted. "Half the time I come in here you're just finishing primping in front of your mirror. You spent every minute of today running back and forth to jump in front of other Bolts to sign autographs and pose for the cameras. You just got handed a crown, a statue and a free diploma from your old High School. You reorganized the whole airshow so you were the main feature, and flew dangerous stunts right over the crowds' heads just so they could get a closer look at
you. Your head is so swollen the cloudpushers could use it for a weather balloon."

She gave Dash a contemptuous look through her aviator sunglasses. "Someone needs to take you down a peg."

It was the absolute worst thing she could have said.

***

"Mare Do Well--- all the time she was you guys? YOU were the one upstaging me and making me look like a boob? But why? Why did you do this to me??"

Twilight doffed her garish purple hat and cape. "Because you were letting all that fame go to your head." She bit her lip.

"We're sorry dear," Rarity sniffed officiously. "But it was for your own good..."

"Ayep. Fraid we just had to take you down a peg," Applejack added---

***

"You-- you--!!" Face red with rage, Princess Rainbow Dash lunged at the Captain of the Wonderbolts.

Over the course of her career, Spitfire had dealt with nobles and their privileged sons and daughters countless times. More than once she'd been asked or ordered to tell them precisely what she thought. As a Captain in the Guard, she was authorized by Celestia and Luna to physically defend herself even against high-ranking royalty. She was fully prepared for Princess Dash to try and slap her.

She wasn't *quite* as prepared for an uppercut to the point of her chin. Her sunglasses went flying.

Protocol and rank went right out the window. The two mares came together in a flailing tangle of wings and hooves. It was a close match: Spitfire was fast with her hooves as she was with her wings. She was also, at least marginally, a trained soldier and knew how to subdue most any attacker. Dash on the other hand had a black belt in one martial art and a brown belt in two others, was the only mare in history to break the sound barrier and was *a freaking alicorn.* The fight was brief, but in the three seconds it lasted Spitfire got a taste of what it was like to tangle with someone who had both pegasus reflexes and earth pony strength. She got in a couple of shots to the face, but the fight ended with Rainbow Dash delivering a haymaker that flipped the fire-maned pegasus completely over in midair. She landed in a corner on her back, stars and planets spinning around her head.

Rainbow Dash stood over her, feet spread, royal regalia askew, snorting angrily. Spitfire noted with some satisfaction that the Princess' left eye was already rapidly swelling shut.

A chiming noise came from the wardrobe.

Spitfire blinked and shook her head. No, the ringing wasn't in her head; it was most definitely coming from the cabinet standing by the bed, the one with the multiple mirrors inside. The decorative windchimes hanging from one corner were jingling merrily, despite the lack of a breeze, and playing a merry repetitive tune. Rainbow Dash shot it a glance and hastily smoothed out her mane and her regalia, muttering to herself. "Stay here and shut your piehole," she snapped under her breath at Spitfire. She stalked over to the cabinet, took a moment to compose herself then swung the doors open. "Hi, who is it?"

Spitfire rattled her head again. Did Dash just talk to an empty cabinet? She got to her feet and quietly
crept around till she could see over Dash's shoulder. What she saw made her jaw drop to the floor—and her heart drop to her hooves. Instead of six reflections of Rainbow Dash, the six mirrors showed five reflections of the rainbow-maned alicorn...and of one considerably larger rainbow maned alicorn, with a white coat and a familiar shining sun cutie mark. "Oh, hey, Princess Celestia," Rainbow Dash said. Spitfire could see she was struggling to keep her face neutral.

"Please, Rainbow Dash," the reflection of Princess Celestia said. "Just 'Celestia' between the two of us. We are peers, now—" the day ruler seemed to realize that Rainbow Dash was looking a bit battered. She started and blinked in alarm. "Rainbow Dash! What happened to your eye?"

"What? What about it?" Dash said, trying to sound innocuous.

Celestia frowned. "Dash—" she looked up and caught a glimpse of Spitfire. Spitfire gulped; she realized she was looking pretty disheveled herself, and had a few nice purple bruises forming where the Princess could see them. "Rainbow Dash, Captain Spitfire-- what is going on?" Celestia asked in that stern-yet-motherly tone of hers.

Dash looked over and saw Spitfire standing behind her. She made strained "shooing" noises in her throat and waved her frantically to the side. Spitfire took the hint and got out of Celestia's line of sight. "It's nothing I can't handle, Princess," Dash said to the mirror.

Spitfire could almost see Celestia's expression, just from the tone of voice. "Dash... if there is some problem with your crew--"

"I can handle it," Dash said.

"It isn't anything that's going to affect your mission, is it?" Celestia asked.

Dash stood her ground. "No, it won't. I promise." She shook her head, then looked Celestia in the eye. "You said we're peers now, right? Like equals and stuff? So I give you my word as an equal; I can work this problem out on my own." She looked over at Spitfire. "She's my Captain, she's my problem. I'll deal with it."

There was long pause. "Very well," Celestia said. She sounded resigned. And maybe a little pleased? "I will leave you to deal with whatever... internal staff problems you seem to be having." She cleared her throat. "I was just doing a quick check-in to see if there were any results?"

Dash shook her head. "Nuthin' yet," she said. "Of course my range is way lower than anypony else's, so..."

"Well, I scarcely expected anything the first day," Celestia said. "If you do find or detect anything of note, contact myself or Luna immediately... we'll have a pony stationed by the mirrors to take down any messages you may have."

"You got it, Prin-- Um, Celestia," Dash said, sketching a salute.

Spitfire heard Celestia chuckle. "Later, my little pony," she said. The faint glow emanating from the mirror-cabinet went dark. Spitfire stuck her head around the frame and looked inside. The mirrors only showed six reflections of Rainbow Dash and six reflections of her own dumbfounded face.

Dash smirked humorlessly at her. "I'm 'Primping in front of a mirror all day,' huh?" she said.

A magic glow surrounded the mirrors; they folded into the cabinet which shut with a snap. Spitfire looked at Rainbow Dash. "Why did you..."
"Cover for your sorry rump?" Dash said. "'Cause I meant what I said. You're MY underling, you're MY problem. Got a problem with that?"

Spitfire's ears flicked back. She realized she'd only thought she was getting chewed out before. "What-- what was all that about a mi--" She started to say 'mission' but Dash interrupted her.

"Oh no no no no," Dash said. "Your talky-talky is done. This is the part where you stick a hoof in it and listen until I'm done talking. So shut up, sit down and listen hard."

Spitfire shut up, sat down, and listened.

1) Featuring their own hometown hero Rainbow Dash and those other five fillies, what were their names again?

2) They walk around nekkid. They scarcely need separate locker rooms.
"Let's start with that 'didn't earn my place' horseapples," Dash said. She marched over to the window and threw it open. The cool Cloudsdale breezes blew in. Mystified, Spitfire watched as Dash took the Element of Loyalty off. "Seems you don't think I earned this. Well, fine." With a casual flick of her hoof she tossed it out the window.

"Yaaagh!" Spitfire yelped. She galloped to the window and looked out, trying to spot the glimmer of falling jewelry. She was about to jump out and dive after the priceless relic blind when a hoof tapped her on the shoulder. She spun around to scream imprecations at the Princess of Loyalty.

Dash smirked. "Psych." Before Spitfire could get a word out there was a flash of octarine light around Dash's neck, and the golden necklace was right back in place.

"Wha--?"

"Li'l upgrade Twilight added," Dash said. "Can't get more than ten feet from me before it teleports back."

"Garh... you... ARGH!" Spitfire managed.

"Hey, what's the dealio? Thought you didn't think I deserved to have it." Dash shrugged in mock casualness. "I figure it would find its own way to somepony who did." Her scowl returned. "You know, like somepony who went into the Everfree forest and beat Nightmare Moon? Like I did?"

"..." Spitfire said.

"Oh, don't say anything yet. We're just getting started." Dash walked over to a display case on the wall and started pulling things down. "Maybe you don't think Nightmare Moon was enough to 'deserve' the Element of Loyalty or being a Princess or a Wonderbolt or anything else. So how about this?" She threw a framed newspaper clip at Spitfire; it bounced off her chest and fell to the floor. "How about pulling off a Sonic Rainboom when I was eight years old?" A medal followed the clipping. "Or the Filly Five Hundred at ten?" A dozen medals and ribbons followed. "How about a dozen other athletic events before I was even old enough to hold a job?"

"How about Discord, huh? Or the Changeling invasion? Or the Crystal Empire? Or the two dragon attacks on Ponyville? The buffalo war in Appleoosa? Tornado Day? How about breaking every record in Wonderbolt Academy? Or how about this one--" a winged coronet sailed across the room to strike the Wonderbolt in the chest. "How about the Best Young Flier's Competition, where I pulled off only the second Sonic Rainboom in history and saved your life?"

At this point she was in Spitfire's face, yelling at the top of her lungs.

"Tell me, Captain Spitfire, did I earn the glorious privilege of working with your wonderful self?"

Spitfire sat there, looking at the trophies and mementos scattered on the floor at her hooves, speechless. "Well, Captain, let me clue you in on something," Dash continued. "In case you didn't figure it out, I never got 'given' anything. Not once. I wasn't born in some noblepony's family or in some royal palace. I spent my high school years pushing clouds to earn spare bits, then went right into doing it to pay rent when I dropped out. I spent every minute I wasn't working weather on training. Training to join your wonderful Wonderbolts. And when I wasn't doing that I was out helping my friends save the freaking world. I earned every last medal, trophy, and bit of applause I
got, even if some stuck-ups thought I didn't. I even earned that diploma they awarded me today... it was a degree in weather management. Don't you dare, don't you ever dare say I didn't earn my place."

She spun around, refusing to look at the Captain. "What I can't figure out is how the hell you clowns ever got yours."

Spitfire swelled up, wings flaring. "I earned my rank by working my way up through the rank and file, like every other Wonderbolt has. The way it's supposed to be--"

"And who gave you those promotions, Howdy Doody?" Dash snapped. "You're a bunch of useless showboats! C'mon, let's look at the record here. Nightmare Moon, Discord, Chrysalis--- complete no-show. Dragon attack? Two seconds and you mighty, mighty Wonderbolts are trapped like bugs in a jar. Rarity falls out of the sky and three of you manage to get knocked out. Grade school pegasus foals know to not grab at a falling pony's flailing legs!

"You're supposed to be the biggest, best and baddest sky fighters in Equestria but you spend all your time doing air shows and pegasus derbies and posing for pictures." She huffed. "Where do you get off calling me swell-headed?"

Spitfire had gone from seething to wilting. Nothing was so devastating to the ego as the unvarnished truth. Dash didn't let up; she drove the screws home. "And then there's you personally. Tornado day, you just sat there on your plot and watched a mission critical water delivery fail. To heck with the record--you, the big bad Wonderbolt, you couldn't get off your fat duff and lend us the wingpower to get that waterspout up to Cloudsdale.

"And Wonderbolt Academy? I come to the Wonderbolt academy, and put up with all that stupid, pointless Drill Sergeant Nasty horsecrap of yours, blow the doors off every record you ever set, and you give the wingleader badge to the most reckless jerk in the squad. Who nearly gets the squad and all my friends-- you know, the Elements of Harmony-- KILLED. And you don't even know about it because you're too busy sitting in your office autographing pictures!"

" The worst one though? The absolute worst, personally? I meet you at the Grand Galloping Gala, and even after all I'd done, after I'd saved the world and saved your life you barely--" her voice hitched a bit. " You barely even remember my name. And you're too busy sucking up to rich hoity toity ponies to say two words to me." Dash turned away again. "I admired you, I respected you... I wanted to be you, when I was a filly. I spent my whole life dreaming of being a Wonderbolt, working my tail and mane off for it..." Spitfire saw her rub her hock across her eyes. "And now I can't have it, but I could have something LIKE it... and you all do this to me."

It was like a barbed dagger through the heart. Spitfire looked the young princess over. She was rough and rawboned and yes, exploding with talent-- she had been even before she'd become an alicorn. And yeah, she was a showboater. But what little Spitfire had known about her just underlined what the Element around her neck said; she was loyal to the death... but if loyalty was her Element, it meant that she needed ponies to be loyal to her as much as she needed to be loyal to them.

And the ponies she admired most in the world, if the posters on the walls meant anything, hadn't even given her one day's chance. Spitfire really felt like horseapples now. She watched her new leader sitting in front of the picture window, sniffling and puddling up, and felt like absolute crap.

The silence lingered. "Your Highness, if you respect us so much," Spitfire said, "Then why do you keep doing all this stuff to us?" It wasn't an angry accusation, just a quietly stated question.
Dash looked back over her shoulder. Her cheeks were wet. "All what stuff?"

"Like using ponies as your errand colts," Spitfire said. "I mean honestly. Sending Lightning Streak in the middle of a show to feed your turtle?"

"Tortoise," Dash corrected automatically. "And what of it?" She seemed to lose her aggression. "You mean I insulted him? I... I didn't mean to. It's just-- I couldn't leave myself; Lightning wasn't performing, and I thought he liked Tank! He grew up around turtles, right?"

Spitfire suddenly recalled; she was right. Lightning Streak had grown up on a turtle farm, hadn't he. "You still shoulda sent that little orange sidekick of yours instead--"

"Uh, no I couldn't." Dash looked aside. "She can't quite fly yet. Raised by earth ponies." She shrugged. "Didn't you notice I was carrying her everyplace in Cloudsdale?"

"Uh, no, I... I hadn't." Spitfire blinked. "Tough break for the kid."

"She's improving. Just a late bloomer."

Spitfire waved it off. "Forget that, then. You've turned the whole show upside down, putting yourself front and center-- practically flying in the audience's faces with those low-altitude stunts..."

Dash grimaced. "I can't help that." She tapped her horn. "My range is still really bad... I can't get more than a hundred feet, tops..."

"Range? Range for what?"

"For the scan, duh," Dash rolled her eyes-- or eye, rather; one was swelled shut. "Twilight and the others can detect another alicorn from like, a mile away, but even they have to be within a hundred feet or so before it becomes directional. What?" For Spitfire's pupils had gone to pinpricks.

"Other alicorns?" the Wonderbolt Captain repeated.

There was an unearthly long pause. "Spitfire," Dash said, suddenly frighteningly calm. "What exactly did you think our big super-secret mission was?"

Spitfire felt a growing suspicion. "Tell me again...."

The explanation was long, and fairly detailed. By the time it was done, Spitfire was softly, but firmly, banging her forehead on the nearest wall. She groaned, her face in her hooves. "So that's it," she said. "Alicorns. We're looking for alicorns! You weren't just pulling air stunts, you were flying a search pattern! I feel like such a blockhead...Why didn't Celestia or Luna TELL us?"

"I thought she did!" Dash protested. "I asked you if you knew what the mission was."

"To look after you," Spitfire said. "At least that's what I thought she'd said--" She paused, fumbling for words. "Princess Celestia... might have mentioned that you'd have more details, but I assumed she meant things like schedules and rotations and--- well darn it you know how vague and obscure she can be," she finished, flustered.

"Yyyyyeah," Dash said, sighing in disgust. "I could see it happening that way, yeah. She's still doing that cryptic mentor thing that drove Twilight bonkers. After a thousand years it's probably a habit..."

Dash's hoof tapped against one of the discarded medals lying about. Her grin faltered a bit as the awkwardness of the past half-hour settled back in. Spitfire saw it and tried to offer an olive branch.
"For the record, Princess-- I did remember all those things you did. At the Gala. And later. I was just...playing it cool. We meet ponies all the time who've done some pretty awesome stuff. Heck, most of 'em become teammates." She sighed. "Every Wonderbolt has to go up the same ladder, one rung at a time. That's the motto, that's the attitude. You gotta pay your dues, no matter who you are." Spitfire looked abashed. "Then we looked up and you were sitting there up at the top of the ladder already. It never dawned on us that you might have got there by climbing up there yourself when we weren't looking."

Rainbow Dash managed a wry grin. "Like my dad always says. 'Some ponies, you can hit a triple and they'll swear you were born on third base.' "

Spitfire gave a half-smile. She picked up a couple of the scattered ribbons with her wingtips and offered them to the princess. "We still got a lot of rebuilding to do, don't we."

"Yeah." Dash took the ribbons and looked away.

Spitfire hesitated. "You're right about the Wonderbolts," she said suddenly. "We've... been in decline a long time. When we were founded, the air shows were supposed to be a recruiting gimmick. But we haven't seen any real combat or missions in years. Decades." She shrugged. "Till soon the shows were all that we really did. We stopped being soldiers and started being celebrities instead. Lost our edge." She winced. "We got a little too full of ourselves to do our duty properly. I'm gonna be busy convincing those flying blockheads that the Wonderbolts aren't too darn special to pull a round of guard duty."

"Hey, it ain't just guard duty, here," Dash said. "She smirked a little and struck a pose. "It's guard duty for the most awesome Princess outta Cloudsdale."

"...Princess Fluttershy." Spitfire held up her hooves defensively, grinning. "Kidding, only kidding..."

Dash snorted. "Funny. Anyway, it ain't just Guard duty. We're on a mission from Celestia to literally change the world. That's kind of awesome right there, innit?"

"The lost alicorns," Spitfire nodded. "The Panacea. Yeah, pretty awesome. Think we can do it?"

"Hey, I know we can," Dash said, holding her head up and sticking her chest out. "Princess of Loyalty and the Wonderbolts? As long as we got each other's backs, what's gonna stop us?"

"Heh. I like the attitude." Spitfire looked at the princess sidewise. "So... Pax?"

"Pax." Rainbow Dash spit on her hoof and held it out. Spitfire winced, but copied the gesture. "Hope you don't mind my saying so, Princess," Spitfire said as they shook hooves, "But you really don't wanna do that at a peace summit or anything..."

"Hah! Now I want to do it, just to see their faces." Dash grinned. She stooped and scooped up her trophies off the floor where she'd dropped them.

"So, first step is probably going to be briefing the rest of the 'Bolts. Properly, this time." Spitfire said. She paused. "All of them. Squadmates gotta work together, and they can't do that if they don't know the other one's flight plan."

"Yeah," Rainbow Dash said, picking up the rest of her scattered trophies and stuffing them back into the display case. "And I don't... I don't want them thinking about me the way that they are right now, either."

"I'll call an assembly in the dining hall," Spitfire said. "Get 'em all at once." The two of them started
for the door. Spitfire bowed and held it open for the Princess. It was a small gesture, but it was something. "So," she asked as they walked together. She rubbed a livid bruise on her own cheek. "Um. What do we tell them about my face and your shiner?"

"The truth. We got in a fight and I kicked your plot." Dash chuckled.

"Heyyy," Spitfire whined.

"Hey, it's the truth--"

 They had the Wonderbolts in the dining hall within the half hour. The explanations took a long time, and there was a lot of disbelief and a lot of back-and-forth questions. But Rainbow Dash could tell when the tide of opinion among the Wonderbolts turned in her favor. There was some reluctance and lingering resentment and a lot of shamefaced guilt, but when they heard how Dash had refused to rat out Spitfire, the spark of loyalty spread rapidly through the crowd. By the end of the briefing, the entire Wonderbolts team was enthusiastically on board with the plan-- and with their rainbow-maned daredevil Princess.

It was halfway through that Dash realized that her nagging horn-ache was gone. It was half an hour afterward that she realized she hadn't seen or heard anything that let her know that she had their loyalty now. She'd felt it...
Chapter 17

The wardrobe chimed. Twilight listened; the chimes were for a general call-- everypony to the mirrors, please. She stepped up and popped the cabinet open.

The other five were already at their mirrors, some of them looking drowsy and frazzled from rising early. "What's up, Twi?" Rainbow Dash asked, yawning.

"I didn't call; I think it was Celestia," Twilight said, looking over at the center mirror, which currently showed... nopony. Where was she? "I think Celestia called us for something--" Twilight looked back at Rainbow Dash. "Dash, is that a black eye?"

Rainbow Dash gave a half-apologetic grin. "Heh. You should see the other pony. Don't worry about it, it's handled. Professor Quibble's probably gonna have me spend the morning practicing minor healing magic, though." She dabbed at her eye carefully. "So what's the five-alarm fire?"

"I don't know, Celestia is--" Twilight started to say, when Celestia herself suddenly popped back into view. She looked a bit... dishevelled, for lack of a better word. Though it almost felt blasphemous to even think it, Twilight reflected.

"Hello, my little ponies!" Celestia said cheerfully. "I'm in the Castle of the Royal Sisters. We seem to be having a bit of trouble here, it's brought up a bit of an issue..."

There was a scream. A moment later, Discord went running past in the background, a look of absolute panic on his face. He was being pursued by what looked like several thick, thorny black vines. "Ahem," Celestia continued. "It seems that one of Discord's old pet projects from back before he was petrified-- there was the sound of something smashing; Discord came running the other way, looking over his shoulder as several vines gave chase.

"-- has gotten out of hand. Fortunately he remembered it before it got past the borders of the Everfree, and--" There was a roar and a gout of flame. Several unicorns came back the other way, jetting flame from the tips of their horns as the vines reluctantly retreated. Screams and shouts and several naughty words echoed from offscreen. "Oh blast it, I'm in no condition to deal with this--- look, we need to call the Elements back."

"But... we just got here," Dash protested.

Celestia rolled her eyes. "No no, not the bearers. We just need the Elements." Discord crabbed across backward in the background, wearing an unbuttoned shirt and waving a chainsaw that judging by the way the blade flopped around was obviously made of rubber at several thorny tendrils.

"Listen up, you primeval screwheads. This is my BROOMSTICK!" He yelled, suddenly whipping out a janitor's broom from behind his back and waving it at the enroaching vines. The vines, unimpressed, snatched it away and snapped it in half. Discord let out a "yeep" and retreated faster.

Celestia groaned and shook her head. "You see we oooOOOP!" Celestia was cut off in mid sentence as several loops of vine dropped around her and yanked her out of sight. There was a tremendous rumpus.

"Agh, not that way!"
"Leggo!"

"Yeeek!"

Several armored guards retreated across the mirror view, waving swords.

"Stand your ground, men, stand your ground!"

"No way, man. I've seen enough Neighpon cartoons to know where this is going!"

"Shuddup Color Commentary or I'll dress you in a schoolgirl outfit and THROW you to them! Now charge!"

"For the Princesses!"

"Oh grand, for the Princesses," Celestia could be heard saying. "In that case would you mind cutting your Princess loose??"

There was the sound of clashing arms. Celestia reappeared, several loops of severed vine hanging off her mane. "Look it's complicated so I'll give you the Cliff's Notes version," she said. "The Elements of Harmony came from an ancient magical tree called the Tree of Harmony." The glass frosted over and a ghostly image of a crystalline tree appeared. "It sits in a cavern below the Castle of the Sisters, and its magic keeps the Everfree in check. The tree has weakened without them, though, and one of Discord's old booby traps-- these vines-- have finally broken loose and started growing everywhere. We need to restore the Elements to the Tree in order to keep the vines, and then the Everfree, from taking over Equestria."


"Yeah, how will we cast the ascension spell without them?" Rainbow Dash said.

Celestia tsked. "You shouldn't need the Elements of Harmony, you're the alicorns of Harmony now, you're more than powerful enough to cast the spell without them. Now please hurry-- these vines are getting impertinent!"

"Of course, Celestia," Twilight said. "What do we do?"

Several minutes of hasty instruction (interspersed on Celestia's side of the mirror with fire, explosions, and Discord screaming like a schoolfilly), and they had readied a teleportation spell. The six bearers each knelt in a chalk diagram sketched out on their cabin floors. Their horns glowed, their Elements shining in response. With a sixfold flash of light, the gems disappeared from their settings and reappeared in a pile at Celestia's hooves. "Oh thank heaven," she said, snatching them up in her magic. "Everypony! To the Chamber of the Tree!" she shouted. There was a rousing cheer, and a score of guards and unicorn scholars followed her as she galloped from the room. The stampede was tailed by Discord, who was bound head to toe in thorny vines and hopping along on tiptoe in pursuit.

"Ow. Ow. Ow. Ow..."

Several long anxious minutes passed. The girls remained riveted to their mirrors, gnawing their lips anxiously, watching the vines creeping back and forth across the empty room. Finally, there was a faint octarine flash of light, and without preamble or ceremony the vines shriveled to dust. Several
more minutes passed, and Celestia finally reappeared in front of the mirror. "It's done," she said, smiling beatifically as she brushed her mane out of her face. "The tree is restored and the vines are destroyed."

The girls sighed in relief. "Thank goodness," Twilight said. "I'm sorry we couldn't be there. I would have liked to see this Tree of Harmony..."

"Oh, you'll get the chance eventually," Celestia said. "It's still there after all. And now that the Tree is replenished, the Everfree should actually be a great deal safer, so you'll be able to visit the old castle whenever you wish." She huffed. "I cannot believe how many books and things I just left here. It's embarrassing. I'm going to start a restoration project as soon as I can..." she smiled impishly. "Get ready for a fresh shipment of books sometime soon, Twilight. The library in this old place is stacked with out of print volumes."

"Oh! Well that's... nice." Twilight picked her next words carefully. "And... the Elements?"

By way of answer, Celestia held up a strange, six sided box with six locks. "It seems the Tree has given us... a substitute of some sort," Celestia said. "And it appears we have a bit of a fetch-quest on hand, because I have no idea where the keys are to this thing." Celestia sighed. "Oh well. That's a concern for another time. Don't worry about it, my little ponies. I have a few other ponies working on getting this thing unlocked. For now... I have to go oversee cleanup from the vines..." she winced. "And help Discord remove some, er, seriously embedded vine thorns."

"You owe me big time Celestia" Discord shouted in the distance.

"Take care, my little alicorns," Celestia said. The mirror went dark.

The six alicorn princesses sat there for a moment, looking at one another. "Well... that happened," Pinkie finally said.
"I'm sorry."

It was the first sentence, the first two words, that Celestia had spoken to her former pupil in years.

The look on Sunset Shimmer's face faded from defiance to bafflement, then hardened back into wary suspicion. "And what is that supposed to mean?" she demanded.

Celestia stepped into the chambers. It was anything but a prison cell; the simple, yet comfortable room was sumptuous enough to have played host to various 'prisoners of honor' in the Crystal Empire's darker days. Other than the magical reinforcements girding it about, and the diamond bars over the window, it would have been indistinguishable from many of the guest suites elsewhere in the palace. It pained Celestia's heart no less to see her former pupil in such a glittering cage. "It means precisely what is said, Sunset Shimmer," she said. "That I am sorry."

Sunset Shimmer's expression merely grew more guarded. "Oh? Then for what?"

Celestia folded her legs gracefully beneath herself and settled to the plush carpeted floor. "Uff. Not as easy to do that as it used to be," she muttered, shifting her weight till she was comfortable.

Sunset Shimmer gave her former teacher a critical eye; she could barely help thinking that the Alicorn princess had gotten a bit... thicker around the middle. Shame to see her let herself go, the embittered unicorn thought snidely. Not surprising; she probably figures nothing matters much now that she's got what she wants...

"For... using you," Celestia said.

Sunset's thoughts stuttered to a halt. "So... you finally admit it," she said scornfully.

Celestia looked at her, pitying. "Yes." She took a deep breath.

"You don't think this little admission is supposed to make things all better again?" Sunset said with a toss of her mane.

"Hardly not," Celestia said. "I knew things had gone terribly wrong when you fled through the magic mirror. I didn't expect an easy fix." She extended a hoof to her ex-pupil. "Sunset... were things truly so irreconcilable?"

Sunset glowered over her shoulder. "Do you know where I've been all these years?" she said. "I've been living in a world full of creatures called 'humans.' Transformed into one of them. There's no unicorn magic over there. No weather control. No earth pony agriculture. Everything I ever learned here was completely useless, save for a couple of tiny spells related to the mirror. Three different diplomas from your School for Gifted Unicorns and I couldn't even hold down a job as a fry cook. I had to pretend I was nearly ten years younger and pose as one of their school children because I couldn't understand their culture and had to learn it from scratch." She shuddered in horror. "You cannot imagine the dystopic hell that is their educational system. It's like a low-grade prison for children, designed to turn their brains to mush. There were days I thought I'd slit my wrists if I saw another gym class or cafeteria mystery meal."

"Why subject yourself to that?" Celestia said. Sunset Shimmer had always had a flair for theatrics,
but...

Sunset smirked. "They have an author over there," she said. "Milton. There's a quote from one of his poems; "Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven." Her smirk widened. "Didn't take much effort to be top of the pecking order. Being Queen Bee over a bunch of teenagers? Piece of cake... for what it was worth." Her smirk disappeared. "Not like you were going to allow me to go anywhere in this world, I might as well try my luck in that one."

Celestia sighed. "How long did you know? How long did it take for you to figure out my plans?"

"Maybe a month before I left. Maybe two." Sunset said. "I had an inkling all along, really. But that was when the pieces all came together. It was pretty obvious when you kept forbidding me certain books and archives and certain lines of study that there was something you didn't want me to know. I just looked everywhere you told me not to." She snorted. "The pieces all fell into place after I started researching the Elements of Harmony."

"Sunset Shimmer, you were my greatest student. You were more powerful and more skilled than any unicorn I had seen in generations... even rivaling Twilight Sparkle. I would have been blind and foolish not to take you as my student when I first discovered you. But I was blind and foolish in entirely different ways. I had my agenda. And I took little regard in what the consequences were to those who were part of it."

"Really?" Sunset drawled. "I never noticed. Tell me, dearest teacher, how many other unicorns before me did you take under your wing and smother?"

"Did I really smother you?" Celestia said softly.

"Did you?" Sunset began pacing back and forth across the room, glaring at the sun princess all the while. "You lied, you obfuscated, you hid truths from me, you, you HERDED my studies one direction after another, always cutting me off when I started 'getting too far ahead'-- hah!" She fumed. "Smothered me? You admitted it the day I confronted you! You were holding out on me. You never intended for me to succeed, you never intended for me to be all that I could be-- you took me on as your student so you could teach me just enough to be useful. Just enough that I could be a tool to free your sister from her prison. And once she was back you were going to toss me out like yesterday's trash!"

"It didn't take me long to figure out I'd been used....At least it meant you still had some use for me...." Words from another unicorn, not all that long ago, echoed in Celestia's ears. The words stung. And I deserve every minute of pain they have, Celestia reflected. "Yes," she confessed. "I held back. But I promise you, I would have never discarded you. I was trying to rein you in. I was afraid of what you might do, what you would have become."

"I WOULD HAVE BECOME AN ALICORN!" Sunset Shimmer shouted, her voice raw. "I would have been a princess! I would have been immortal! I earned that, I sweated and slaved and worked for that-- even when I didn't know what the prize was I knew that there was a prize to have, and I gave everything I had to get it! All the horseapples you put me through..."

"Is that all our time was to you?" Celestia said. "A means to an end?"

"Wasn't it to you??"

Celestia let her jaw close. Touche'.
Sunset was off on a tear. "And who were you to decide I didn't deserve it?" she went on, tears starting in the corners of her eyes. "What a load of horseapples. I don't remember reading about anyone descending on a sunbeam to give you YOUR crown---"

"You're correct. I didn't have that right."

"Oh and now you-- huk?" Under any other circumstances, Celestia would have laughed at the expression on Sunset Shimmer's face.

"Tell me, Sunset Shimmer," Celestia said. "With all my planning, all my conspiring... what was my goal?"

Sunset sputtered a bit. "To... to free your sister from the Moon," she said matter-of-factly.

Celestia allowed herself a smile. "And then?"

Sunset's brow furrowed. "And then you and she would... reign over Equestria," she said.

Celestia let her smile spread another infuriating inch. "And then?"

"And then wha--" Sunset caught herself and shot Celestia her best deadpan look. "Very funny. Hysterical."

"Well?" Celestia goaded, her damnable smile not moving. "And thennnnn?"

Sunset growled. "I hated it when you did this when I was a filly."

"And?"

"And it hasn't improved with age."

"Well? And thennnnnnn?" Celestia leaned in toward her, obviously waiting for an answer.

"There is no then! That's it! Nightmare Moon defeated, Princess Luna restored, save the day, huzzah huzzah, Sol Invictus, cupcakes for everyone, that's it, the end, nothing else!" Sunset shouted, stamping her hoof in exasperation. "What else is there??"

"Forever is a long long time to say "that's it, the end, nothing else," Sunset Shimmer, " Celestia noted. "This is why I tried to forestall ascension for you. You had a vision of yourself sitting upon a throne, a princess of Equestria-- but no picture in your mind of what came afterward."

Sunset Shimmer actually looked chagrined. Could I actually be getting through to her? Celestia wondered. "Well," Sunset blustered, "I planned on figuring that out later. I would have had all of forever to decide what came next, after all." She looked away. "But you decided I wouldn't get that opportunity, didn't you?"

It was an obvious line, cast out and fishing. Celestia deliberately took it. "And I was wrong," Celestia repeated.

Sunset Shimmer stood very still. "Wh-what are you..." she swallowed, obviously disbelieving her ears. "You're not..."

"You do enjoy hearing me say that, don't you," Celestia said. "I. Was. Wrong."

"This is... this is some sort of trick?" Sunset said. She turned and faced Celestia.
"No, it is not." Celestia got to her feet. "It is part and parcel of the plans... the "what comes after"... that I hinted at, Sunset. I am blessed with a gift of immortality. Did you never wonder if, in my long life, I ever sought out some means to share it?...."

In a few brief sentences, Celestia outlined the Hunt, the Panacea, the entire Great Plan. Sunset Shimmer's jaw was nearly to the floor by the time she was done. "...Everypony?" she said. She sat down with a thump. "You've been trying to find a way to make everypony an alicorn??"

"Since before your great great great great grandsire was born," Celestia said, nodding. "Luna's imprisonment was a painful delay in that long plan...but even now we make up for lost time."

"If... if making all of us alicorns was your goal, then why...why when I tried to pursue it...?" Sunset waved a hoof, indicating the years now lost behind them both.

Celestia hung her head a bit. "Because, in the midst of all the plotting for my sister's return, I took my eye off the goal," she admitted. "I let my anxieties over you, over how you were growing, over what might happen, interfere with my judgment. I was alone, and time pressed on me greatly-- and you were so... cold. So indifferent to the Magic of Friendship. I was afraid that you might...no. I all but knew that you would fall down the same path that took my sister and I would be unable to save you, or worse that I would be unable to save Equestria from both Luna and yourself. I convinced myself that you were not yet worthy of alicornhood..."

"And now you think I am?" Sunset said. Suspicious. Skeptical.

Celestia snorted and gave her a wry grin. "Not even close." She held up a hoof, forestalling Sunset's surely scathing reply. "But that's just the thing. I forgot that I wasn't worthy of it, either. Nor was my sister. Nopony is.

"Ascension is nothing less than the gift of life itself. And it never has been, and never will be, about deserving it. And maybe, if I wanted you to be more loving and trusting... I have to love and trust more, first."

Celestia's horn flared white. When the light dimmed, they had transported to a new place. They were standing in a circular crystal chamber, the walls and floor lit from within by silvery light. The roof overhead was open to the sky; the aurora of the Crystal Empire could be seen dancing across the night stars. The floor was etched with a complex pattern of runes and scrying lines that glowed purple and gold. At three equidistant points stood three ponies--- Princess Cadance, Princess Celestia, and a stallion Sunset Shimmer assumed was Prince Shining Armor. While Celestia and Cadance only wore their regalia, for some reason he was wearing a cape over his shoulders. Odd.

Sunset's attention was taken away from that a moment later when Celestia spoke. "Sunset Shimmer, are you ready?"

Sunset felt her heart start to hammer. "This is happening," she breathed, "this is really really happening--??"

Then she stopped. She stood in the middle of the room, panting, looking up at Celestia, tears filling her eyes. "This? Now? Even after all... all I said? After all I did?"

Celestia nodded. "If you are willing."

Sunset Shimmer lowered her head, shaking it. "I-- I can't," she said, her voice cracking. "I can't go back. I can't change what I've done, what I've become. I can't make up for what I've done--"

Celestia stepped forward, lowered her head to Sunset Shimmer's. "And nopony is asking you to,"
she said. "All we're asking is for you to... accept forgiveness when it is offered."

Sunset Shimmer looked up again, a knot in her throat. "I'd... I'd like that," she croaked.

"Then I hereby give it," Celestia said, smiling. She stepped back to her place in the circle and raised her wings.

"Auntie, are you sure the three of us...?" Cadance said.

"Are more than enough," Celestia said confidently. "If anything, having six alicorns doing it the last time was overkill."

The last time? Sunset managed to wonder giddily.

"From one to another, another to one.

A mark of one's destiny singled out alone, Unfulfilled;

From all of us together, To each of us together--"

The world turned to silver glass.

"...Sunset Shimmer?"

Sunset opened her eyes. She was lying on the crystal floor, the runic lines humming beneath her. Cadance was kneeling next to her, looking concerned.

"I'm... okay, I think..." Sunset sat up, pulled her legs beneath her.

Flexed her wings.

The squee of delight rang off the crystal walls like windchimes.

Shining Armor sidled over to Celestia while his wife helped a euphoric Sunset to her hooves. "I'm surprised you decided to go through with this so, um, precipitously," he said.

"How so?" Celestia asked.

Shining grimaced discreetly. "You did tell us she had been something of a problem student, even before she ran off," he clarified. "And she was caught breaking into the palace... by her own testimony to get access to one of the Elements of Harmony. So breaking and entering the palace, attempted burglary..."

Celestia 'mm-hmm'ed, "Tell me, Shining Armor, are any of those deeds worthy of a death penalty?" At Shining Armor's shocked expression, she continued. "Shining, to deny her alicornhood, especially when she was so clearly a nascent, was to effectively sentence her to death. It would have placed me in the moral position of having the cure to a fatal illness in my grasp, and refusing to give it to any of the patients in the hospital whom I didn't think were "worthy" of living.

"And yes, she lusted after power-- but desiring power is not a sin nor a crime. Anyone who says they do not desire power is saying they have no desire to effect change. And I am scarcely going to
condemn her now for sins which are barely even a fragment of a shadow of those committed by Luna or Discord."

"And if she abuses her power?"

"And if you abuse yours? Or Cadance hers? Or any of the Six?" Celestia smiled a little sadly. "Let us all answer for the sins we actually do commit. Sufficient to the day are the evils thereof." Her smile turned a little wry. "Besides which, there are ten of us. I think we can take her in a fair fight," she teased. Shining rolled his eyes.

The two of them rejoined Cadance and Sunset Shimmer. "And how are you feeling now, Sunset Shimmer?" Celestia asked.

Sunset Shimmer looked up at her with confused, penitent eyes. "I... I don't know how to feel right now," she confessed, gingerly flexing her new wings, all sorts of emotions warring on her face.

"For now, try 'happy,' " Celestia suggested, startling her with a congratulatory nuzzle.

The new alicorn gave her a surprisingly vulnerable smile. "So what happens next?"

Celestia tsked. "Sunset, Sunset, Sunset. Still no plans for tomorrow?" she teased. "Oh don't look at me like that. There are a few things to plan at Canterlot... a few fences to mend with old acquaintances back at your old school, for one," this earned a wince from Sunset Shimmer. "And quite a few machinations behind the scene for the Great Plan with which you will be helping. And perhaps some time for you to grow acquainted with the others."

"Others?"

"Why yes. I don't know how close the tabs are you've been keeping on dear old Equestria but you have nine other alicorns besides myself to acquaint yourself with... though most of them are scattered hither and yon at the moment--"

Sunset's wings flared in surprise. "Nine??"

"Counting the three standing next to you right now," Celestia said. Sunset looked at Celestia and Cadance, doing an obvious mental count, then gave Shining Armor a puzzled look. "Come on, Captain, remove your cape..."

"Yeah, come on, honey, take it off, woo woo," Cadance teased. Grumbling and red faced, Shining Armor dropped his cloak from his shoulders and flapped his still rather preadolescent wings.

Sunset stared. "Snrrrk....."
Chapter 19

The Cherry Jubilee was in full swing when Applejack's ship arrived at Dodge Junction. Every street was full of booths and carriages and tents and the narrow path between them were packed with ponies celebrating Dodge Junction's number one crop. Music blasted away, and the sounds and sights and smells of a country fair filled the air.

The city council welcomed Princess Applejack with open arms; as Celestia and the others had expected, the country ponies were apparently tickled pink to have one of their own wearing the royal tiara, and having "their" princess attend their jubilee was just, well, the cherry on top.

For Applejack it was even a little touch of homecoming. No less than Cherry Jubilee herself was there to greet the princess and her entourage. The two mares laughed as they reminisced about the last time Applejack had passed through Dodge Junction. "I'm glad you finally went back and patched up whatever it was you was running from back then," Cherry Jubilee said, giving Applejack a hug. "I always hoped to get another chance to see you when you didn't have a cloud over your head. Though I certainly wasn't expecting you to have a horn growing out of it when I did," she added with a raised eyebrow and a grin.

The Apple princess rolled her eyes. "Nor wings outta my back, I reckon," she chuckled. "Changes coming fast and thick these days."

"Don't I know it," Cherry Jubilee said. She looked up at Applejack's hat. "Though some things stay the same I see. Interesting wear for a princess..."

Applejack adjusted her headgear self-consciously. It had been restored and reblocked, and the hatband was replaced with a jewelled gold band, but it was quite obviously her old beloved Stetson. "Got a word to the wise," she said. "That I shouldn't just throw away the old me 'cause of all the new. Besides, I'm a princess now-- that means I get to decide what that means." She grinned.

"Good advice from a thousand year old mare, I reckon?" Cherry Jubilee said.

Applejack shook her head. "From a twelve year old filly," she said.

"Well Princess, I hope you have a few words of your own," Cherry Jubilee. "We'd all be honored if you said a few words..." she gestured up at the grandstand where a microphone waited. Already a huge crowd was gathering, ready to hear the first words from their new Princess.

Applejack winced a bit, but hid it. "I reckon that's what I'm here for," she said. Part of it, anyway, she thought.

Applejack took a deep breath, smiled nervously and nodded. This would be her first public speech--and her first try at using the alicorn seeking spell. She'd spent most of the trip being coached for this. She had some mare whose entire job was to teach her diction and elocution and all that other Canterlot style stuff. She'd even written stuff out on notecards to say.

She stepped up to the podium and lifted the microphone in her magical grip to hide the telltale glow as she cast the seeking spell, took a deep breath, looked at her audience.... all those ponies there to see their new Princess, uncertainty and hope on their faces, unsure of what to expect.... and chucked it all out the window. "Greetings, y'all," she said with an awkward smile. There was a round of polite applause. "I'd say I'm happy to be up here in front of you all, but I'm the alicorn of honesty,
and the honest truth is I'm pretty much scared spitless right now." There was some muted laughter. "I
know I ain't what you all expected. Sakes, I ain't even what I expected, and I see myself in the mirror
every morning." More laughter.

She got a little serious. "A lot of changes have been coming round lately for all of us. Big changes,
crazy changes." she rustled her wings and glanced up at her horn. "Case in point.

"I know how scary that can be. Specially for folks like us. I'm an Apple, and an apple farmer from
the day I was born. I know what it's like to be a farmer, to rely on things bein' the same as they
always were, an' always will be...to be part of that. Rain and shine, sunrise and moonrise, th' turn of
the seasons, the blooms in spring and the fruit in the harvest...

"Now all these changes coming around, upsettin' the apple cart-- or the cherry bucket, one of the
two--" another brief ripple of laughter. "New princesses popping up all over. You gotta be wonderin'
about us, about me; tryin' to take my measure. After Nightmare Moon from one side and Alicorn
weddings fulla changelings from the other, you gotta be wondering what shenanigans I'm going to
be gettin' up to." The laughter was a little more robust.

"I won't lie to you. Changes are a-coming. A lot of 'em. Some might be a mite unsettling." The
crowd was silent. "And some of 'em...some of 'em are going to be wonderful.

"But I promise you this much; what I see here...friends, an' family, and tradition.... Folks lovin' the
land, and workin' it, and bringin' forth the goodness in it... that will never change. We may not be
able to tell which way the branches are gonna grow, but I promise you that we're never gonna forget
our roots. Maker so help me, There'll be cherry blossoms blowing in the hills of Equestria a thousand
years from now, and a thousand more after that.

"So whaddya all say we get this shindig underway? I hear tell there's a cherry pie out there with my
name on it!" Whoops and cheers answered her, and more than one hat was tossed in the air. The
applause sounded like a stampede. The bluegrass band on the stage behind her struck up a fast tune.
A hoedown started spinning up even as she descended from the grandstand. "So how'd I do?" she
said to Grey Wolf, half joking.

The Captain of her guard answered her seriously. "Very good, actually," he said. "You spoke to
them in their language and on their level, and you reassured them about two big points-- that you
were still one of them, and that you weren't going to go turning their lives upside down. And you did
it without being anything but yourself. I give it, mmmh, eight out of ten." He gave her a grin to let
her know he was pulling her wing a little.

Lockheed the Gryphon gave her a wry look. "Might not go over so well when you meet the Fancy
Pants in cities like Manehattan," he said.

Applejack shrugged. "Shoot, I know Fancy Pants," she said, unconcerned. "Nice feller, and a
gentlepony right down to his hooves," Lockheed let his beak click shut, nonplussed.

Babs and Applebloom came running up. "Great speech, Applejack," Applebloom said, giving her
sister a hug.

"Yeah, great speech, Cousin Applejack," Babs said.

"Can we go look around the fair?" Applebloom said.

"Don't see why not," Applejack said. She reached into her pannier and pulled out a sizeable bag of
bits and tossed it to her sister and cousin. It tickled her pink to see their eyes go round when they saw
how much was in it. "Now don't go expecting this EVERY time we go out someplace.." she started to say. But she broke down and chuckled as they shook their heads solemnly "no." "Go on, splurge a little," she said, giving them a wink. "An' don't stop till ya hit the bottom of the bag. Lockheed, would y'all mind keepin' an eye on them?" The gryphon snapped off a salute. "Go on, you two." The two fillies took off like a shot, their gryphon bodyguard in tow.

"So what's up next?" Applejack asked Cherry.

"Oh, the bake-off," Cherry Jubilee said. "And I do believe a certain Princess has been nominated as one of the judges."

Applejack grinned. She might be an Apple to the core, but a slice of cherry pie always went down smooth. "Lead the way!".

Applebloom and Babs were fit to be tied. They had more spending bits than they'd ever had in their lives, and it was burning a hole right through their panniers... but they couldn't make up their minds what to spend it on! For lack of options-- or more accurately for a surfeit of them-- they each bought a cherry ice cream cone and took to wandering the midway, looking at all the booths, Lockheed tagging along behind. There were cherry pies and pastries, cherry baskets, cherry preserves, cherry seedlings and saplings, maraschino cherries, chocolate covered cherries, cherry tarts, crafts made from hoof-carved cherry wood, cherrychimichangas... as well as a plethora of tools for farming, tending, pruning and harvesting cherry trees.

"Gotta say, they got almost as many things for cherry farmin' as we got for apples," Applebloom noted.

"Well, duh, yeah," Babs said. "Trees are trees and fruit are fruit.... Is fruit? You know what I mean."

Applebloom nodded. "Huh, well that's different," she said, pointing. Up ahead was a rather sizable pavilion with several ponies working it. But unlike the other cherry themed booths and stands, this one seemed to be themed around... bees? Curious, the two fillies wandered over to check it out. It was indeed, a display on honey bees and their products. There were beehives of various makes, beeswax products, leaflets on apiary practices, and rows and rows of jars of honey, all neatly labeled with doily lids and glowing golden in the sun.

"What's this doin' in a cherry festival?" Babs wondered.

The mare behind the counter, A butter-yellow earth pony with a (what else?) honey colored mane and a honeycomb cutie mark, overheard them. "Well, young filly, bees are an important part of cherry growing," she said enthusiastically. "Without our bees, the cherry trees around here wouldn't get pollinated and we wouldn't get any cherries!"

"I was gonna say," Applebloom said. "At Sweet Apple Acres we gotta have a beekeeper come round every year with his hive when the apple blossoms come out. Couldn't have apples without 'em."

"Too right," said a voice behind them. The girls turned around; standing right next to them was a pony Applebloom recognized immediately. "Toffee!" she said, surprised. "What're you doing here?"

Indeed it was Fancy Toff, the upper crust colt she'd met at the Junior Gala... and humiliated herself in front of, she remembered suddenly, blushing. He looked considerably different; his light brown mane was tousled rather than carefully slicked back, and tucked under a pageboy hat. He'd traded his suit
in for a scarf-- more of an ascot, really-- that contrasted nicely with his darker brown coat. "Hello again, Applebloom," he said. "Good to see you again. Though I hope you're feeling better than you did the last time we met."

"Um, yeah..." Applebloom muttered, blushing red as a tomato. "I'll be fine as long as nobody tries to feed me mud bugs again."

"And who's this?" Babs said.

"Oh, uh, Babs, this is Fancy Toff, from the Junior Gala," Applebloom said. "Toffee, my cousin Babs Seed." The two greeted each other. "So what're you doing here at a cherry festival, Toffee?"

"Actually, I'm here with the Apiary ponies." He waved to the beekeepers. "One of my father's businesses is in sweets and sweeteners-- sugar, syrup, sweet leaf, agave nectar, and of course honey. Well, after meeting you at the gala I got sort of curious about life out in the country, so I asked Father if I could come along with the beekeepers on their business tour, help out a bit, learn the jolly old family business, sort of thing." He shrugged. The girls made sounds of understanding. "So... would you like me to show you around a bit?" The girls looked at each other then nodded. Sure, why not?

Toffee escorted them through the minor maze of displays, chattering about each for a short while. He told them odds and ends about beekeeping, about how to handle a new swarm into a new hive, about the uses of beeswax and honey and royal jelly ("did you know that honey never spoils? And you can use it on a cut or burn...") and other interesting tidbits. After a bit they came around to a table with a huge display of pint jars, and a tray full of plain crackers. "Oh, this is my favorite part," Toffee said. "The samples." He picked up a tiny paper plate and laid out some crackers on it. "Which would you like to try? Clover? Apple blossom? Cherry blossom, of course..."

"Oh yes," the mare behind the counter agreed. "And the blossoms do make such a lovely honey..."

"There are different kinds of honey?" Babs said.

"Over three hundred kinds. Alfalfa, Avocado, Basswood, Blueberry, Clover, Eucalyptus, Fireblossom, Orange blossom..." She shrugged, dabbing a different type of honey on each cracker. "The flavor of honey is different depending on which flower the bees get their nectar."

Applebloom looked skeptical. "Does it really make a difference?"

"Oh a great deal of difference," she said. "Take a look at this." She turned around and pointed to a row of jars locked in a special display. "Now these here are for display only-- they're real honey, but you never ever want to eat them."

"Why not?"

"'Cause they're poison." The girls gulped. The mare tapped a jar. "This? This is Oleander honey. A taste of it will kill you. This one is from rhododendrons. And this one is from azaleas. Any of these are deadly." The girls took note of the "poison" symbol etched on the side and nodded. "Now there are other honeys that won't kill you but you don't wanna eat them, either. This one here--" She pointed out another jar. "Is Poppy honey. It won't poison you but it can leave you feel like Discord stirred your brain with a stick. Make you see and hear things and more." The next jar was... oddly colored. None of them could put their hoof on exactly how. "This here, is Poison Joke honey. Nasty little magic plant in the Everfree that--"

"--We know about Poison Joke, ma'am," Applebloom said.

"You do?"
Applebloom snickered. "Leastwise my sister does. I had to help whip up the cure when she an' her friends got in a batch."

The apiary pony chuckled. "Well you know what that plant does, then," she said. "this stuff does the same thing... only lots faster. And it takes a lot more than a bubble bath to cure it. You have to take a dunk in the cure at least once a day for three, four days before it works its way out of your system. Otherwise you just relapse the next day."

"I'll be sure an' stay clear of it," Applebloom said.

"Well that said, why not try some of the much more pleasant kinds, here," Toffee said, handing both girls a plate. He offered Lockheed some, but the gryphon declined. The foals spent several minutes munching on crackers with dollops of honey and comparing the taste. There was even some discussion between Toffee and Applebloom about the possibility of Zap Apple honey. Of course the bees would have to move pretty fast, they agreed, but maybe?

Babs licked her lips. "Kinda makes me wonder how bees make the stuff," she said.

"I know they make it out of nectar, but that's about it," Applebloom admitted.

"Oh that's simple enough," the pony at the stand said. She pointed to a poster with a stylized bee decorating it. Toffee quickly scanned the poster-- and suddenly began frantically waving at the mare from behind the girls, emphatically indicating the need to stop talking. She didn't notice, but it was too late anyway. Squinting, Applebloom began to read out loud. "Huh. 'Honey is made by the domestic honeybee. It is a thick, golden liquid produced using the nectar of flowering plants and is saved inside the beehive for eating during times of scarcity. Nectar is extracted from flowers using a bee's long, tube-shaped tongue and stored in its extra stomach, or "crop." When a honeybee returns to the hive, it passes the nectar to another bee by..."

She squinted. "Re- regur..."

"Regurgitating," Toffee said fatalistically.

"Regurgitating the liquid---'what's that mean?" Applebloom asked.

"Um..." Toffee said.

Lockheed cleared his throat. "It means, 'throwing up,' your Highness," he said faintly. Applebloom froze.

Toffee stepped between her and the poster. "Look, you really don't want to keep reading now..." Toffee pleaded. Applebloom pushed him aside and kept reading. She wouldn't have been able to say why; it was some uncontrollable impulse, like standing at the edge of a cliff and feeling the urge to leap off.

"Regurgitating the liquid into the other bee's mouth. This regurgitation process is repeated from one bee to the next, until the partially digested nectar is finally deposited into a honeycomb where it is allowed to thicken....."

Bab's plate hit the grass, and her hoof went to her mouth. "Y-you mean this stuff is...bug puke???

Toffee looked a little distressed. "I... I wouldn't say that precisely, I mean--"
"Not just bug puke," Applebloom said. "Recycled bug puke..." her eyes were as round as saucers. "They fill up on nectar..."

"Shut up Applebloom..." Babs said.

"An' then they fly back to the hive..."

"Shut up, Applebloom..." Babs pleaded. She was looking ill. Even Lockheed, standing stoically at attention, was looking queasy.

"An' they find another bee... and they--" she swallowed mightily. "And then THAT bee goes off and finds another bee... and then that one finds another... all of 'em puking into each other's mm-mm--m-m-m---" Her stomach lurched. She slapped her hoof to her lips, her face turning bilious green. She spun in a circle, looking for a bucket or a trashcan or...

"Not on the display!" the mare in charge yelped.

Heroically, Toffee whipped off his pageboy hat and stuck it under Applebloom's chin. There followed a minute of horrendous retching noises as the farm filly proceeded to utterly destroy a fifty-bit hat in the most thorough way possible. When she was finally done, Toffee gingerly set his hat down away from himself and offered a napkin to the gasping filly. She looked at him with devastated eyes. "It's okay," he said feebly. "Never liked that hat anyway... heh..."

Applebloom did the only thing she could do. She turned and bolted from the pavilion, running like Tirek was on her tail. The honey mare behind the counter looked at the stunned colt and at the dust cloud left behind by the fleeing filly and sighed in a world-weary way. "The Birds and the Bees, young man. It ain't always pretty," she said.
Chapter 20

The high society of Neigh Orleans was, no other word for it, simply fabulous. But of course, what else would it be? It was a rare, subtly balanced blend: the elegance of stately manors and the primeval heat of the bayou summer; courtly dancing to swinging jazz; fine dining served on elegant china that could set even Celestia's solar-powered palate to sizzling. Rarity took to it like a fish to water.

It was somewhat ironic, really, Rarity thought. Her life in humble-- well formerly humble Ponyville, and her long friendship with Applejack had prepared her for Neigh Orlean's quixotic blend of the genteel and the rustic. It amused her to think that 'unsophisticated' Applejack would be just as comfortable in Neigh Orleans high society as Rarity herself.

Their host, Southern Comfort, was a jovial if genteel stallion, a stout white unicorn pony with a greying sky-blue mustache and goatee and a charming accent that rolled back and forth casually like brandy in a snifter. He had been "Honored, deeply honored, Ma'am" to play host to the Princess of Generosity and her little sister Duchess Sweetiebelle, and had made a point of personally showing them about. The carriage tour of the city had been entrancing, the courtly Southern Comfort had a story, legend or bit of folklore about nearly every building along the way. And this little lawn party was certainly charming in its own right. They had music, food, and even a bit of dancing-- all of it like the Neigh Orleans ponies themselves; big, bright, bold and a little brassy.

Thus far though, it had yielded little in the way of results for the alicorn hunt. Her own perfunctory scans had revealed no latents among the throng, young nor old, wealthy tycoons or servants. Her casting about for clues amidst the idle gossip weren't any more fruitful; no hints of unduly long-lived families or folk of unusual magical prowess worth mentioning, and the only ancient dowagers and matriarchs to be found were of sufficiently wrinkled status to justify their age.

She sighed a bit and nibbled at an hors d'oeuvre. At least the party was for a good cause; a fundraising for 'the local economically disadvantaged,' as their host put it. At least Sweetiebelle was having a good time. She'd been entranced with the music, and was absolutely pigging out on beignets.... of course the staff absolutely adored her and kept plying her with the sweet pastries whenever they saw her. One more trip to the buffet and the little unicorn was going to be 50% powdered sugar by body weight.

She noticed a slight commotion off to one side. Their host was off in an alcove with somepony; a mare from the town, it looked like. She seemed terribly agitated and was speaking urgently with him. Curious, Rarity trotted over. Southern Comfort saw her approach and gave her a polite half-bow. "Sorry to leave the festivities, your Highness," he said. "It seems I'm needed in my professional capacities." Southern Comfort, as it so happened, was a doctor, and one of some respectable reputation. This was obviously one of his patients. "Miss Cling Peach here, well her daughter's been ill, and it seems she's taken a turn for the worse..." his grave tone and the mother's distraught expression told Rarity all she needed to know about the severity of the situation.

Rarity nodded. "Of course... is there anything I could do?"

The offer was given without a second thought; such things had always been automatic for the alicorn of Generosity. Southern Comfort started to reply in the negative, but Peach's eyes lit up with hope. "Oh, please, your Highness--" she said.
Rarity realized with a dismaying jolt that Peach saw an *alicorn princess* offering to help. She probably expected Rarity to spin a medical miracle out of the air with her horn. She started to protest that she wasn't *that* sort of alicorn... but she couldn't do it. She couldn't take away that spark of hope in a mother's eyes. "I... don't know what precisely I can do till I see her," she averred. "But I can at least try."

Cling Peach's eyes refused to dim. "That's... all I can ask, I suppose," she said. "But... even if you can't do anything..."

"Well, even so," Southern Comfort said, with a twinkle in his eye, "I'm sure havin' the prettiest new Princess in Equestria visit her bedside will do wonders for the filly's spirits."

Rarity couldn't help but chuckle at the old stallion's flattery. "Shall we depart then?"

Southern Comfort looked around. "Perhaps it's best if we slip out the back way, so as not to arouse unnecessary chatter," he said.

"Indeed," Rarity said. One of the things she'd found as a newly minted princess was that the simple act of leaving a room could leave one entangled in complicated farewells if one allowed it. "Jade Blossom?" She said over her shoulder. The elegant bodyguard appeared at her elbow, making Southern Comfort jump in surprise.(1) "I'll be taking my leave in a moment... discreetly."

Jade nodded in understanding. She did not need to speak; It went without saying that she would have the covered carriage brought around back, or that she and the other ladies of the radiant guard would facilitate Rarity's departure by distracting the party guests with their graces and charm. Rarity's guardmares were trained at Celestia's own hoof; they were professionals at this sort of thing. Heck, they were the best.

"Are you leaving, Rarity?" Rarity jumped a bit and turned around. Sweetiebelle did have the most unsettling ability to sneak up on a pony. She was standing behind her now, peering curiously at her older sister.

"Um, yes," Rarity said, lowering her voice. "Please do keep it quiet, dear, we want to slip out discreetly."

Sweetiebelle nodded, sighing. "Princess stuff, huh?"

"Yes, one might say that."

"Well, I better come along and keep you out of trouble," Sweetiebelle said with an air of longsuffering. She took her shawl down from the coat rack in the hallway and threw it over her shoulders. "Where are we going?"

---

The royal carriage was soon clattering its way down the twilit streets of Neigh Orleans. Nopony paid them the slightest heed; the carriage, while sumptuously furnished inside, was on the outside indistinguishable from the mundane ones to be found rolling on any city street in Equestria. (The princesses, even the newest ones, weren't born yesterday.) The journey was far from quiet, though. Rarity's brief explanation for their sudden departure-- "we're going to see a very sick little filly--" had roused Sweetiebelle's inquisitive nature; she pried Southern Comfort with countless questions about the sick filly they were going to see. She inquired after the the filly's name (Sweet Peach), her age...
(slightly younger than Sweetie herself), and numerous other bits of trivia only interesting to a foal her age... and to a Princess who wanted to visit her. Rarity silently thanked Providence for Sweetiebelle's presence.

The carriage pulled up before a two-story house on the edge of the city. It was a far more humble abode, a cozy two-story more common among the working class of Neigh Orleans. They disembarked, and Cling Peach let them in. Her expression fretful, she led them to a bedroom up on the second story. The change in Southern Comfort's demeanor was intriguing. His gentle, genial air was gone, replaced with something firmer. He marched in, his black bag hovering in the air behind him, with a kindly smile on his face but the air of a stallion come to do battle with sickness itself.

The room was upstairs, at the end of a narrow flight of stairs and down the hall. It was dimly lit with a few glow-fly lanterns. An orange-on-peach stallion-- presumably the father-- sat watch by the bedside; even from the hallway Rarity could see the bags under his eyes. In the bed next to him was a tiny filly, sleeping restlessly. She was a unicorn filly with a pinkish peach coat and mane... or so Rarity guessed; it was hard to tell her exact coloring under the ghostly white glow covering her. Southern Comfort gave the worried father a few comforting words, then moved to the bedside, opening his bag.

Sweet Peach roused as he began taking her vitals, his instruments flitting around the bed. "Doctor Comfort?" she said.

"Yes, m'dear, it's me," Southern Comfort murmured. "Seems you're feeling a bit more peaked today, are you?" Sweet Peach nodded. "Well, we'll see if we can't find something to pep you up a bit, make you feel a bit more comfortable." Sweet Peach smiled and nodded again. "Have you been taking the medicines I left?" Sweet Peach stuck out her tongue and pulled a face, but nodded. Southern Comfort chuckled. "And you been eatin' your Mama's soup, like I said?"

"M'not hungry," Sweet Peach protested softly.

"Well you need to eat a little bit anyway," Southern Comfort chided. "You can't get better if you don't get some nourishment in your tummy, now can you?" He got a twinkle in his eye. "Tell you what; if you promise to eat up the next bowl of soup your mama brings up, I have a little surprise for you..."

Sweet Peach looked intrigued. "Okay...?" she said.

Southern Comfort looked over his shoulder. "Your Highness? Do come in, would you?"

Rarity fixed a smile on her face and stepped through the door into the light. The round-eyed expression of wonder that bloomed on the little filly's face, Rarity thought, was worth the trip across half a continent. "Hello, dear," she said. "I heard you were feeling under the weather and thought you might like a visit."

"Princess Rarity," Sweet Peach breathed.

"And Duchess Sweetiebelle," Rarity added. "Come on in, Sweetie."

Sweetiebelle tip-hoofed in and gave a shy wave. "H'lo," she said.

The sick little filly squeed with delight.

Rarity's visit certainly pepped up Sweet Peach, at the very least. The faintly glowing filly spent the next half-hour peppering the Princess of Generosity and her sister with questions and excited chatter while the doctor examined her. Eventually the excitement proved too much for her, and she dropped
off into slumber almost the moment Southern Comfort's examination ended.

Rarity had done what little she could to contribute; after years of caring for Sweetiebelle, she'd learned quite a few cantrips for fighting colds, detecting fevers, and treating sniffles, infections, allergies, rashes, and other foalhood ailments. But she was no healer. She could only make the empty gesture, waving her glowing horn over the little filly and hoping for some... some burst of alicorn inspiration. But in the end... nothing.

Once Sweet Peach drifted off, Rarity, Sweetie and Southern Comfort crept out, leaving the careworn parents to tuck their daughter in. They reconvened downstairs in the living room.

"So, what is she sick with?" Sweetie asked the genteel doctor.

The doctor's face wrenched a bit, his mustache screwing up on his face. "We aren't sure," he confessed. "We call it Foxfire Fever-- due to the glow, of course. There are about a dozen cases in the city; little Sweetiebelle is the most severe. It isn't contagious, that much we know...magic scrying shows it's no germ or infection... but that's all we know. The patient simply grows weaker and sicker, with little appetite, little energy. Becomes bedridden and feverish. A faint glow appears around the patient's body, almost like a swamp light, concentrating at the hooves, wingtips or horn. It gets brighter and brighter as the disease progresses. Sweetiebelle's little horn almost looks like a birthday candle now..." He looked at Rarity. "I know it's presumptuous of me, your Highness... but is there any chance your magic--"

Rarity felt her lightened mood at the filly's joy turn to a cold lump. "I... I'm sorry, Southern Comfort," she said. "I've only been an alicorn for a few short weeks... even if my gifts as the Alicorn of Generosity laid in those directions, I barely have any higher magical education..." the look of disappointment on his face broke her heart.

He gave the two an apologetic look. "The bayou is a strange place; every now and then some odd ailment pops out of the swamp-- It shouldn't surprise me you haven't heard the like before."

Rarity pursed her lips. "Actually, we've had a run-in with more than one odd ailment over the years," she said with wry amusement. Poison Joke came to mind. "Thank goodness for Zecora-- and for Twilight, when... Of course," she said aloud.

Southern Comfort cocked an eyebrow. "Beg pardon?"

"My good Doctor, I may not be able to help you myself," Rarity said, "But darned if I don't know a passel of ponies who can. I have not yet begun to fight." She pulled out her compact and flipped it open. She cleared her throat and spoke into it. "Twilight Sparkle," she said.

The compact glowed. The good Doctor jumped when a feminine voice came out of it. "Hello Rarity," Twilight's reflection said. "What's up?"

"Something dreadfully important, Darling," Rarity said. "We need that big beautiful brain of yours. You might want to, ah, 'get on the horn' with the others-- especially Fluttershy--- and oh yes, the Princesses... and can you figure out some way to get to Zecora through these things?"

"I... think I can figure something out, yes," Twilight said.

"Well then do get on it, dear," Rarity said. "There's a little filly who needs our help!"
Jade Blossom had that effect on ponies. She was of Neighponese descent, with an ink-blue mane, golden coat and delicate angled features of her homeland. She seemed to take delight in playing up the 'exotic deadly she-ninja' stereotype to the hilt... almost as much as she loved opening her mouth and utterly destroying it with her Appleoosan accent.
Chapter 21

Things had moved quickly. At Rarity's insistence they had moved the proceedings--- doctor, patient, family and all--- back to the Fabulosity and reconvened in the royal suite. A giddily hopeful Mr. and Mrs. Peach were even now tending to Sweet Peach, who was lying asleep in Rarity's own bed.

Once her guests were squared away, Rarity had fired up the full-length Magic Mirrors and gotten things started. She may have been no healer or scholar, but she was an absolute networking demon. Within minutes, the Princesses of Equestria were online and their staff were hustling. Even Celestia, Luna, and a rather surprised Zecora (1) were in on the consultation with an amazed Southern Comfort. "I cannot thank your highnesses enough for this," he said for what had to be the fourth time.

"It's no problem, Doctor Comfort," Twilight said. She had gotten to work the moment Rarity had spread the word. She had multiple books open before her; others could be seen circling in the air behind her. "It's important to catch these sort of things before they spread."

"Even if'n they wasn't, we wouldn't wan't to leave a li'l filly in the lurch," Applejack said. A chorus of agreements answered that.

"Prin... Celestia, have you or Luna ever heard of such a disease as this?" Twilight said.

Celestia, in her own mirror, shook her head. "I've heard of many similar conditions, Twilight," she said. "But nothing quite like it. I have sent word to the royal physicians inquiring after it, but... it will be a bit of a search."

"Strewth, I must confess, I have never heard the like, either," a frowzy-headed Luna admitted. (It was still early in the morning, for her.) A worried-looking Pinkie Pie was standing alongside her, bouncing in place.

"I know, neither have I, well I've heard of frost fever and dust lung and rock farmer's toe and parasprite itchies and I know fifteen home remedies for the chicken pox but I've never heard of anything like a glow-in-the-dark fever," she said. "And I've asked all the guardponies and the ship's crew and the serving staff and even the cabin colt..."

"Oh, good thinking, Pinkie Pie," Twilight said. "Everypony, be sure and pass word around with your staff.. even the chambermaids. We all have crew from all over Equestria, surely somepony has heard tell of it."

"Ah'll send word around my crew," Applejack said. "Ah probably got the widest selection o' guards on the planet. One o' them's bound to know something. Go on, one of y'all, git on the grapevine, double time..." the farmpony said to the guards standing behind her.

"What about you, Zecora?" Twilight said.

The zebra herbalist shook her head, her gaudy earrings jangled. "Of ailments I know not a few, and remedies for them I know too, but truth be told I do not know if they will be of any use to you." Her voice wavered and her reflection rippled; the reception from the inside of a cauldron wasn't exactly perfect. The others blinked. Had she just made a limerick? "This disease of a strange glow, its cause I do not know. To make amends, some invigorating brew I might recommend? Twill lend your patients vigor and strength, while we pursue the cure at length."
Southern Comfort hemmed and hawed. "I'm... not so sure about using zebra potions," he said gruffly.

Applejack gave him a withering look. "You got a problem with zebras?" she said.

Southern Comfort looked flustered. "No no, of course not-- it's... just that... zebra potions and such aren't really properly tested---"

Applejack cocked an eyebrow and looked to say something else, but Twilight interrupted. "Zecora's medicines and potion work are first rate, Doctor Comfort," Twilight said mildly, forestalling anything more heated from Applejack. "I would trust her with my life. I have, in fact. If she offers you a remedy or treatment, you can trust it."

Southern Comfort sketched a bow to the mirrors, abashed. "My deepest apologies, Ma'am. I meant no insult." He pulled a quill and parchment from his doctor's bag. "Ah, you were saying, about an 'invigorating' potion?"

Zecora dipped her head in reply, accepting the apology with good grace, and began reciting one of her many recipes.

As providence would have it, no miracle cure was forthcoming. Hours passed; those on board the Fabulosity were forced to bed down for the night while others continued the search. The inquiries spread; more ponies were brought into the spreading web.

Throughout the whole, Sweetiebelle was an angel-- she took it upon herself to look after their littlest guest, talking with her and entertaining her when she was awake, fetching soup and juice and (with some embarrassment) a bedpan when Sweet Peach needed it, doing her best to be a good nurse. No nursing cutie mark was forthcoming, alas, but she did a fair enough job.

It was early the next morning when the first lucky breakthrough happened. A few of Applejack's ragtag band of soldiers had, indeed, heard of Foxfire Fever, or at least something close enough to it. "They called it 'Ghost Candle Sickness'," Omari said. The zebra stallion stood next to Applejack and gave his report, his deep voice sending shivers down several of the mares' necks. "I heard of it while I was stationed out near Hollow Shades. I never saw a case myself, but the description matches."

"If the symptoms match true, we owe a debt to you," Zecora's ripply reflection said. "Did the villagers speak of the cure that we seek?"

Omari's ears flicked back nervously at the zebra shaman's voice. "No, Ma'am," he said. Very, very politely. Zecora chuckled but said nothing.

Three batponies, the Nightshade triplets, edged into frame on Applejack's other side. "Our mother told us stories of such a glowing disease, in our home in the Foal Mountains," the sister said. "There were several names for it..." Her ears laid back. "None of them... very encouraging. Ghost Candle, Grave Candle, Hinkypunk bite..."

"Hinkypunk bite?" Southern Comfort said.

One of the batpony brothers spoke. "According to the story, naughty foals got the sickness when a Hinkypunk bit them. The glow was supposed to be... um... supposed to be the sick foal turning into a ghost." A brief chill passed around the room.

"What's a Hinkypunk?" Rainbow Dash chipped in.

The batpony rolled his eyes. "Nopony ever said... just that it lived down in wells and old cisterns. I
always thought it was a story made up to keep foals from playing around places where they could fall into the water and drown."

"In wells or cisterns," Southern Comfort muttered. "Or swamps, one presumes."

"Just what I was thinking," Rarity said, unsettled. "Do you mean to say this could be some sort of poisonous animal bite?"

"Or a magical one," Twilight chipped in. "Hinkypunk, that rings a bell. Let me get my Compendium of Magical Creatures..." a voluminous tome spun through the air and opened before her. "Hinkypunk, Hinkypunk, H-I-N-K... Ah!" Everyone leaned in towards the mirror. "Hinkypunk, also known as a Ghost Candle, Hob's Lamp or Jack o’ Lantern. Small-category Sylph. It appears as a small glowing light. Usually seen in bogs, swamps, or abandoned wells. Often mistaken for Will o' Wisps, known for leading ponies astray... hm."

"But why would it be going about biting ponies?" Southern Comfort said.

"Maybe if it felt its home was being threatened," Fluttershy said. "The book says they live in wells and pools. If a pony went poking about in there, it would bite them to defend its home."

"Or for more malevolent reasons," Luna said ominously. "We recall a few variants of such unseelie things that delighted in poisoning and sickening the unsuspecting."

Rainbow Dash sat up. "Wait, I know this one!" she said. "Hey Flutters! Remember that jump-rape poem everypony used to say when we were fillies?"

"Which one?" The butter yellow alicorn said.

"You know, it was sort of like ring-around-the-rosy," Rainbow Dash said, rolling her eyes at the girlishness of the memory. "How’d that dorky thing go...

" Starve a fever, feed a cold,
Tummy ache, bread mold,
Rosemary for aching wings,
Willow Bark for pains,
Ginger Beer for Stomach aches
Something... for... brains?
Something something Manticore sting,
Honey for a rainbow burn..."

"Oh yes," Fluttershy beamed, clapping her hooves.

"--Eye bright, see right---
And a pocket full of Silphium
For Jack o’ Lanterns bite!"
Twilight made a pleased sound. "It sounds like a list of folk remedies!" she said. "That sort of thing is common in most juvenile folklore..."

"Yeah, that last verse never made any sense to me, even as a foal," Rainbow Dash said, rubbing her head. "I mean, who ever heard of getting bit by a pumpkyn?"

The third batpony standing with Applejack chuckled. "We will have to take some time to tell you the folklore of our land," he said. "The vampire melons(2) should interest you." Dash blinked a double-take.

"Let me check my book of herbs..." Twilight said, whipping another book over to herself, right out of Spike's grasp.

"Silphium I have heard of indeed, a miracle plant for those in need," Zecora. "But alas for lot, seen it I have not."

"Wait, you said Silphium?" Princess Celestia said. "Oh dear..."

Heedless of the commentary, Twilight continued to flip through her tomes. "Silphium: Silphium (also known as silphion, laserwort, or laser) was a plant that was used in classical antiquity as a rich seasoning and as a medicine. It was the essential item of trade from the ancient North Zebrican city of Cyrene, and was so critical to the Cyrenian economy that most of their coins bore a picture of the plant." Haha, yes!" Twilight crowed. "Girls, we have it! This highly useful medicinal plant...." her face fell like a stone. "went extinct in the second century of the Celestial Era..."

There was a collective cry of dismay. "Yes, I recall that," Celestia interjected. "The plant was literally worth its weight in silver... but the demand was enormous, and it was incredibly difficult to cultivate-- we did try to save it, but even the best earth pony gardeners struggled with it... I'm sorry, my little ponies..."

"Why was it so in demand?" Rarity asked.

Celestia's cheeks turned a bit pink. "Because, among its many medicinal uses, it was also an aphrodisiac-- and, um, a method of birth control," she said.

"Oh. Um, was it... effective?" Rarity couldn't help asking.

Celestia looked at her. "Enough that it was listed as an essential for a well-stocked spice rack," she said drolly. "And the plant is still associated with love and romance to this day... you know how a valentine heart is shaped?" She sketched out in the air with her horn. "That was actually the shape of a Silphium seed pod."

"So are we saying that the only known cure for this ailment is a plant that has been extinct for over eight hundred years?" Southern Comfort scowled.

"Surely it can't have died out everywhere," Fluttershy protested.

"That may be, my little pony," Celestia said. "But if so, it's well hidden. Expeditions went out for nearly a century afterward, looking for any sign of it, with no luck."

"Well my little animal friends can go where no pony explorer could ever get," Fluttershy said firmly, getting to her feet. "I'm going to ask my birdie friends to start looking for it. Little valentine shaped pods, right Twilight?" Twilight nodded. "Good. I know they can find some." She trotted out of frame. "...I hope they can..." they heard her say faintly before the door closed behind her.
"Okay, hold up, backtrack a second," Rainbow Dash said.

"Vampire melons?"

"Melons, pumpkins, any type of gourd really," the batpony guard shrugged. "According to the legend, if you leave a ripe one on the vine under a full moon, it turns into a vampire. Bleeds from the stem, rolls around chasing ponies, thirsting for their blood..."

"Ewww. Ohmigosh is that real?" Spike said over Twilight's shoulder.

"Spike, it's just an old mare's tale," Twilight said patiently.

"Yeah, and so was Nightmare Moon," Spike pointed out. "No offence, Princess Luna."

"None taken."

"Look, that's not--"

"Hey, I'm with Spike, here," Rainbow Dash said. "I wanna know if this is legit. I mean I don't wanna be at a picnic someday, get a big old slice of juicy watermelon and get my face sucked off!"

"Don't look at me, Dash. I'm a mare who grows Zap Apples for a livin'..."

"Girls, could we please focus...?"

The group began quibbling over details. Rarity, for one, did not join in. Biting her lip, she silently withdrew, leaving Southern Comfort and the doctors standing around the mirrors debating alternatives with the scattered Princesses.

An hour or so later, Sweetiebelle found Rarity out on deck, looking out over the city. She sidled up quietly to her older sister. "Are you okay, Rarity?" she asked.

Rarity gave her a wan smile and nuzzled her. "As well as I can be, one supposes," she said. She heaved a sigh and turned her gaze back out over the city. "I'm just... at a loss for anything I can do."

"What do you mean?" Sweetiebelle squeaked. "You're a princess now! And an alicorn! You can do anything!"

"Hardly, dear," Rarity said with a hint of self-contempt. "Princesses can't do anything they want. We can only do so much. And alicorn?" Her laugh was a little bitter. "Alicorn of Generosity-- what does that even mean in this case?"

"I don't understand." Sweetiebelle's voice was soft and laced with concern.

"I don't suppose you would," Rarity sighed. "Think about it. Celestia is the alicorn of the Sun. Luna is the alicorn of the Moon. Applejack's magic lets her know truth from falsehood and honesty from deceit. Cadence's magic can make love fountain up wherever she goes. Twilight-- well, she's the very embodiment of magic itself! But what does it mean to be magically Generous?"

"Well, um," Sweetie tapped her hoof against her chin. "You're rich now.. you could... use your magic to give bits to the poor?"
Rarity chuckled. "I am and I'm not, Sweetie," she said. "Princesses have a lot of money and can spend it... but in the end it's from the treasury, from taxes and the like. It's somepony else's money. Everypony else's, actually. And it's not generosity to give away somepony else's money. Generosity is when you can give of yourself." Her smile disappeared into a frown. "And in this case... there's really nothing of myself that I can give. I don't have any magic that can help, I don't have any wealth of my own, beyond a carefully measured allowance, I don't even have book knowledge or experience that is of any help here. What can I do for that poor sick little filly-- make her a new dress to wear in her sickbed?" Her voice cracked.

Sweetiebelle quietly burrowed into Rarity's side, comforting and seeking comfort. "You'll think of something," she whispered.

"I know I should," Rarity said. "That's what I've been doing; standing here trying to think of something. Anything." She stamped her hoof in frustration. "We have a diagnosis, we know what the cure is... all we need is the cure. But the cure has been extinct for almost a thousand years! Oooh, it's so frustrating!" She stamped again. "Somewhere out there is the cure-- somewhere! Little Sweet Peach needs it so badly, and if we could just find it... oh... oh my!"

Sweetiebelle looked up in surprise at Rarity's interjection. For some reason Rarity's horn was lit up and sputtering like a firecracker. "Oh my goodness! Sweetiebelle, fetch the guards!"

"Why?" Sweetiebelle yelped, stepping back out of reach of the sparks.

"Because I'm going to need their help right awaaaaaaaaaa---" and with that the elegant alicorn began sliding across the deck. She accelerated rapidly and, with a squawk, shot over the rail in a flail of wings and hooves.

"AAAAH! Pony overboard!" Sweetiebelle screamed, running to the rail and looking over. To her relief Rarity was not plummeting to her doom; Sweetie had forgotten she had wings. Of course, Rarity had been unprepared to be flipped over the rail by her own horn, so she got her wings got tangled in the trailing drape of her gown. The Alicorn of Generosity tumbled to the ground squawking and flapping like a chicken launched from a barn loft. She managed to hit the ground with all four hooves and began sliding down the street, dragged by her madly sparking horn. "Hang on, Rarity-- I'm coming!" Sweetiebelle shouted. She galloped back down the ship, looking for somepony to lower the ship and drop the gangplank.

---

1) She'd nearly been scared out of her stripes when Twilight Sparkle's face had appeared in the surface of her cauldron.

2) Yes, this is a real bit of folklore from eastern Europe.
"Of course," Rarity growled. Skid, scrape, scuffle. "This is the rule the whole universe operates on, isn't it?" Skid, skitter, skid. "When in doubt, humiliate the fabulous one!"

The Princess of Generosity was in anything but a fine mood. Without warning, her alicorn magic had literally yanked her off the deck of her own airship and was even now dragging her headfirst down the (thankfully) broad avenue through the center of Neigh Orleans. Thank Providence that she hadn't plunged into the lake. As it was her flailing flight over the rail had left her a disheveled mess. She looked, she imagined, like someone had taken a Princess Pony doll and rammed her backwards into her own gown.

Despite her best efforts she was skidding on her hooves through the city at a distressing rate of speed; her silver hoofshoes looked absolutely smashing but they could never be said to be made for traction. The stares she was getting from the sidewalk cafes as she slid past were simply mortifying. "Good day, bonjour, Princess duties, just passing through, haha--"

She heard tiny hoofbeats behind her. Out of nowhere Sweetiebelle came running up alongside her. "Sweetiebelle! How did you get down from the ship so quickly?"

"Feather Fall spell," Sweetie said. She wasn't even panting; my goodness all that running around with Scootaloo was doing wonders for her.... "I asked Princess Twilight to teach it to me the minute I learned we were going on an airship. Is this what I think it is?"

"Yes, darling, it appears I'm reliving my cutie mark story," Rarity said, stumbling a bit as she jumped over a curb and resumed sliding. "Though I don't think I'm going to be finding any jewels at the end of this... eep!" she stumbled on a loose cobblestone, nearly losing her footing.

"Thought so. Hold on, Rarity!" Sweetiebelle ran on ahead. Rarity, with her head down from being dragged by her horn, couldn't see where she'd gone. There was a smash of breaking glass up ahead, somepony shouting angrily, Sweetie saying something, and then she was galloping alongside again. "Okay, great-- lift your right front hoof!"

Baffled, Rarity obeyed. Sweetie slapped something on the bottom of her raised foot, and ran around the other side. "Now left front!" The action was repeated. "Back left! Back right!" The little unicorn fell in alongside her again. "There, that oughta do it," she said in satisfaction. It was then that Rarity realized she was no longer skidding, but rather rolling. Quite smoothly too.

"Roller skates?" She yelped. "Wait, where did you get these??"

"I had to bust out a store window and grab them," Sweetie panted. "Don't worry, I threw in some money--"

"Sweetie!" Rarity said, scandalized.

"What, did you want to have your hoofes dragged off?" Sweetie said scornfully.

"Fair enough darling but I hope you'll notice that I'm starting to accelerate!" She was; the frazzled fashionista, freed from fickle friction, was slowly beginning to pull away from the furiously galloping little filly.
"Don't worry, Rarity-- your pegasus guards went on ahead of you!"

"What are they doing?"

"Clearing a path," Sweetiebelle shouted. "Call it a hunch but I don't think you're going to be turning any corners--!!"

Sweetiebelle fell away. Rarity was now going at a terrific clip, passing carriages both magical and non as if they were standing still. She was on a straightaway at the moment, but she recalled with a thrill of terror that Neigh Orleans was notorious for its impossibly crooked little streets, and oh heavens, the road ahead took a sharp right turn, she was going to plow right into that restaurant--

And there were two of the pegasus mares from her radiant guard, one kicking open the double doors and one-shotting the protesting maitre' d while the other ran inside. Rarity rolled through the front door, knees locked, and rocketed through the dining room and past several upturned tables-- "So terribly sorry everyone!" --- and here came the swinging doors to the kitchen, cutlery and poufy hats everywhere, aiee, the stoves! And there was the second guardmare catching her hoof and flipping her in a somersault right over the sous chef's head and out the back door, and she was barreling down a back alleyway and back out onto the street, oh Celestia, Luna, Cadence, and Discord, ramping up a vendors cart, and a voice behind her shouting about cabbages as she landed back on the pavement, all sixteen little wheels whirring, and she was clear!

*Let's see Scootaloo do that*, the fashionista thought madly to herself. "Oh Maker, not road construction!" she shrieked. But there her guards were again--- two unicorn gents, sharp as if they'd stepped off the cover of EQ in their Rarity Exclusive suits and carefully groomed hair, teleporting in ahead of her and rapidly assembling something out of the boards and loose construction materials lying about, finishing the enormous ramp a split second before her rollerskated hooves hit the front edge. "Spread your wings, your Majesty!" One shouted as she hurtled past.

Feeling like a dunce, *why hadn't she thought to take to the air in the first place?* Rarity obeyed. Or tried to; her frazzled wings were still tangled in her drape. She soared off the end of the ramp with something less than the grace of an eagle, flapping madly. Despite everything she caught some air, but her frantically flapping wings were in no condition for flight. She only barely cleared the rooftop of the building beyond, her skates clattering on the shingles, and then she was plunking down on the road beyond....

Then she was crossing an open field. It looked to be a bowling lawn; several ponies were in the midst of playing, what was it called, bocce? They paused, mouths agape, as one of the crown Princesses rollerskated through the middle of their game, leaving skate-wheeled furrows in the carefully groomed grass. "Playing through," Rarity yodeled as she hurtled past.

For a brief second she dared to feel relief. She was apparently beyond the city limits now, and was no longer in danger of plowing headfirst into a brick wall or something equally unyielding. Perhaps the worst was behind her.

Then she looked ahead and remembered precisely what began where the city of Neigh Orleans ended. "No. No! NOOOOOOO!!" she wailed, trying to side-brake with all four skates.

It was no use. She was dragged at full speed, kicking and screaming, straight into the muddy embrace of the Neigh Orleans swamp.

Mere moments later, Sweetiebelle and a good half dozen of the Radiant Guard galloped up to the edge of the swamp, panting and flecked with sweat. "Oh no!" Sweetiebelle wailed. The muddy wake of Rarity's passing still rolled. In the distance could be heard the echoes of screams, wails of
dismay and some incredibly unladylike cursing as Princess Rarity was introduced to the flora and fauna and other charms of the bayou, up close and personal.

Marigold shook the sweat from her wings and turned to the others. "Anypony with wings, after her. Jade, get word back to the ship. Dapper Blue, get a swamp boat and a guide and follow after us. We have to get to her Highness before she runs into a gator or a cottonmouth nest or something even more unpleasant."

"Isn't she immortal?" Dapper Blue dared to say. "She's an alicorn, nothing much should be able to seriously hurt her--"

"I'm not worried about something happening to her as much as I am about her happening to somepony else," Marigold said. "Didn't you read the reports on what happened when Princess Sparkle panicked at her school entrance exam as a filly? The way her Highness reacts to anything dirty, muddy, or slimy..."

"We may find ourselves giving a fascinating and culturally significant name to the crater she leaves behind," Dapper Blue finished, wincing. "Got it."

"Hang on, Rarity," Sweetiebelle shouted into the swamp unhappily. "We're coming to save you!"

Catching up was easier said than done. The Bayou was big, and deep, and roofed over with thousand-year-old treetops that turned the sunlight into a dim green memory. By boat, hoof or wing, delving into it was a slow process.

Or at least it was when one was not a magically propelled alicorn. Rarity was all but waterskiing through the swamp, muddy water ostrich-pluming behind her. She had no idea how she was managing to avoid all the gnarled trees and fallen logs blocking her way. Her runaway seeking spell was, at least, allowing her enough leeway to dodge over, under, and around any obstacles in her immediate path, before dragging her back on the hurtling course she'd taken.

It wasn't however, merciful enough to allow her to escape unscathed. Her royal dress was in muddy tatters. Her hoof-saving roller skates and the hoofshoes beneath them were long gone, as were her tiara, torc and one of her earrings. She was drenched, splattered with mud, festooned with moss, covered with pond scum... she wasn't merely filthy, she was layered. One could probably have deduced the course she took through the bayou by examining the strata of filth caked on her body. Her hooves had made regrettable impact several times with things that she didn't care to examine very closely, but which could only be classified as squishy, unlucky, and had gone "Squack!" when you stepped on them.

And she was absolutely, totally certain that she had swallowed a bug.

The terrain hadn't been entirely submerged, of course, alternating between muddy hillocks and semi-solid paths and pools of varying size and content (some of said content being alive.) She was plowing her sputtering way across the surface of yet another brackish pool when the spell entrapping her horn finally gave out. She sloshed to a halt in the dead center and sank to the bottom.

After a moment of frantic thrashing and splashing she discovered, to her semi-relief, that the water only came up to her withers. She stood up, her hooves sinking slightly into the horrible, horrible mud, spat out a frog she'd scooped up accidentally at the last pool, and began struggling not to spiral into hyperventilating hysterics. She couldn't lose it now. She couldn't. The spell had brought her to
what she was looking for, she knew it. She parted her sodden, filthy mane with her hooves and looked around.

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. None of the little heart-shaped plants that the pictures had shown in the books. Just some moss, a green layer of pond scum, and a few cattails. That and a lot of mud. "That's it?" Rarity screeched. "A muddy hole? A swamp puddle? That's what you brought me here for, you stupid spell?"

Then the alligator surfaced behind her.

Rarity spun around so quickly the gator never saw her move. One minute he was sliding through the water towards her, the next she was literally nose-to-nose with him. "Take your best shot, lizard," she hissed. Her voice echoed eerily and her eyes glowed in her mud-caked face with an absolutely unholy light. "I'll make a matching handbag and shoe set out of your still living skin and stitch your writhing soul to the lining."

The gator turned round, exited the pool and proceeded to set a land-speed record for reptiles across the swamp.

"Coee," a childlike voice said. "I neber seen no caiman haul tail like dat, befo." Rarity yipped and turned about. A gangly unicorn filly was standing on the shore, staring at Rarity with wide-eyed wonder.

It was only Rarity's already-stunned state that kept her from going into shock at the filly's. The child was maybe a year older than Sweetiebelle, and well into that gawky, gangly stage... gawky and gangly enough that she could have passed as a more feminine Snails, back in Ponyville. She was muddy brown, and had an absolute thatch of a mane and tail that was as green as spanish moss. She had vivid green eyes as well, and a smattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks. Her hooves were chipped and muddy; her horn was dull and long overdue for a proper buffing, and not all the muddy brown of her coat was her own. She wore a faded, stained flour-sack dress that was at least two sizes too small; it left her haunches exposed clear up to her cutie mark-- which appeared to be a lizard or salamander of some sort-- and had two panniers made from woven baskets. She was gawky and rustic and full of knock-kneed charm and every inch of her appearance just screamed of casual neglect. She gave Rarity a gap-toothed grin.

Despite her own predicament there was a part of Rarity's spirit that was already running frantically back for a comb and curry brush and hooficure kit with which to pounce upon the child. "Um, hello dear," she said, trying to maintain her composure (what tiny glimmering spark was left of it, anyway.) "Who might you be?"

"Ah'm Mudpuppy," the filly said. "Who're you?"

Rarity cleared her throat. "I am Princess Rarity, Element of Generosity," she said grandly.


Rarity blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

Mudpuppy rolled her eyes. "City, fo sho," she muttered. "Y'wan git outta the water, Lady? You skeered dat gator sho nuf, but I dunno ifn the water moccasins gonna be dat respectful." She giggled. She set down her panniers, scooted down the bank and held out her hoof.

"Oh, yes. Quite," Rarity waded to the edge of the pond, swamp water drizzling off her. "Coee," Mudpuppy said, eyeing the ragged remains of Rarity's dress. "Maybe you no lyin' at me after all.
"Thank you for noticing," Rarity said. "I promise you, I'm telling you the truth, dear." She took the proffered hoof. The unicorn filly was surprisingly strong; she pulled Rarity free from the muck with ease. Rarity staggered up onto dry, or at least solid ground, with a lurch. Mudpuppy overcompensated and staggered backwards, nearly tumbling off the other side of the grassy ridge into the marshwater on the other side. At the last second her wings flared from under her dress, flapping and catching her balance.

Rarity froze, stunned. Mudpuppy's eyes went wide. She hastily tucked her wings back in the slits down the sides of her dress, flushing, her ears laid back. "You didn't see nuthin," she muttered.

Rarity tried to speak. "Mudpuppy... I..."

"You didn't see nuthin," Mudpuppy repeated. Louder, this time. She gave Rarity a glare, half defiant, half pleading. Rarity closed her mouth, thoughts buzzing. She nodded carefully.

"I saw nothing."

She watched as the filly, the alicorn filly, turned away and levitated her grass-basket panniers back in place. Rarity hastily cast the detection spell while her back was turned. Yes, it was true.."Excuse me, dear. Is there some place around here I can clean up?" Rarity asked cautiously.

"My Mamere an' I live nearby," Mudpuppy said cheerfully, her upset seemingly forgotten. "We gots a tub you kin wash up in..."

"Well then, by all means lead the way," Rarity said with what she hoped was a winning smile. Mudpuppy gave her a gaptoothed grin and started striding her knock-kneed way through the swamp. Carefully keeping her teeming questions under her tongue and her own, still-unseen wings hidden under the remains of her dress, Rarity quietly followed.

---

1) After leaving it even less fit for drinking than he found it.
Chapter 23

The trail to Mudpuppy's home was a long, meandering one. Rarity found herself trailing after the gangly little alicorn as they walked an almost invisible maze of raised hillocks and clumps of grass that wound through the bog. All around, the bayou retained its mysterious air. Insects buzzed and seethed, frogs croaked and other things unseen and barely guessed at made their vocalizations. The air was heavy and sticky, and the canopy high above kept the swamp below in a twilight as dark as anything in the Everfree. Rare beauty bloomed here and there; exotic flowers, here a vividly colored lizard, over there a gauzy winged dragonfly with a glittering sheen. From time to time Rarity saw odd lights in the distance—ones that she would have been sure were lanterns or lights in windows; her little guide expressly ignored them, following her own path.

It was a quick trot around yet another mass of exposed tree roots, and the house they sought came into view. It was a tin roofed shack, maybe one or two rooms, to judge by its size, its front porch standing on wooden posts sunk into the bayou waters, its back end resting on a short rise of solid ground. Rarity could see wood smoke wafting up from the stovepipe jutting out of the roof, and a hefty stack of split firewood leaning against the back wall. It had the usual oddments around it of busy folk with much to do and little room to spare: washtub and washboard hanging from nails on the outside; yard tools leaning against porch railings.... Clothes hung limply from a wash line out back, not stirring in the sweltering heat. Glass bottles of every color dangled on strings from the porch rafters. Rarity could see still more bottles, gourds, and vials, stacked on shelves right up the insides of the windows.

as they drew closer, Rarity could make out a figure sitting on a rocking chair on the porch; it was a blue-green earth pony mare, easily as wizened as Granny Smith if not more so. She wore a mottled do-rag and a moth-eaten apron, and was puffing away at a corncob pipe with a stem as long as her foreleg. She turned and looked in their direction; Rarity couldn't even make out her eyes in the mass of wrinkles. "Mudpuppy! Who dat witchoo, chile?" Pipe or no, her lungs were healthy enough.

"Fancy city lady, Mammaw!" Mudpuppy bellowed back. "She needs some help-- she done had a lil accy-dent!" The latter was followed with high filly laughter.

Rarity once again became painfully aware of her dishevelled, or perhaps devastated, condition. She was a sodden mass of tattered cloth, hair, swamp weeds and mud. Her dress was in rags and her wings were literally caked to her sides. "Oh yes," she said in a pleading tone. "Please tell me you have some place where I can at least try to amend this! The mud is starting to dry..."

Mammaw's eyes went so wide they actually made an appearance. "Sakes alive, chile! Did summon drag ye here by yer horn?"

"Something like that," Rarity said dully.

"Cain't leave ye like that," Mammaw said. "Gwan, chile, take 'er roun' back. Yew know where the washin' up stuff is at..."

"C'mon, lady!" Mudpuppy said. She tugged on Rarity's foreleg, urging. "We'll git yew cleaned up aw reet, I ga ron tee!"

A few minutes later Rarity found herself standing out back, standing underneath a makeshift shower head as ice-cold water sluiced down over the mud-clotted mare's back. It took some time and even a
bit of scraping, but the worst of the mud finally melted off, leaving Rarity standing there, drenched and bedraggled, shivering so violently her teeth rattled. She was still barely recognizable as a pony, but at least she didn't look like a Maori MudMare.

Meanwhile, Mudpuppy had put her ruined clothes, what were left of them, in a tub of water to soak. Rarity was fairly sure there wasn't a thing left worth saving, but Mudpuppy had insisted. The very thought of simply throwing away "so much pretty cloth" had appalled the filly. Then a larger pony-sized tub had been dragged out and filled with water, along with a bundle of brushes and washcloths. Once Rarity had removed the first layer, Mudpuppy had addressed her to the tub. "Gowann an' hop on in thar," Mudpuppy said. "I'll go git some of Mammaw's bath soap." She trotted into the shanty.

Rarity regarded the tub with apprehension. Despite the muggy heat, she was already shivering... and cold water would be dreadful for getting the rest of the mud out of her mane-- "oh you silly thing," she murmured to herself. Her horn flared, and soon the tub was heated. She stepped in and sank in with a sigh and a squeal; yes, perfect, almost tepid, but not so warm as to be uncomfortable in this heat. The water browned like she was steeping tea.

Mudpuppy returned, bearing a large glass bottle filled with a rather thick looking liquid. "Taint much," she said humbly as Rarity's magic plucked the bottle from her mouth. "Jest some ol' homemade soft soap an' whatnot..."

"Oh this will do fine, darling," Rarity said charitably. She popped the cork and sniffed at the bottle. She gave a squeal of delight. "Ooh, what a lovely herbal fragrance!"

"Mammaw likes to add herbs and what not," Mudpuppy shrugged dismissively.

"Well she has good taste," Rarity said, pouring a liberal dose of the soap straight into the bath. Rarity's horn glowed and the tub swirled into a luxurious froth. Rarity sighed and sank down into the scented foam. She regarded the cleaning implements Mudpuppy had and grimaced; a few quite literal wash rags, and some scrubbing brushes that looked like they'd had a long hard life at grim labor.

"Easy enough to fix," she said aloud. A quick flick of magic and the rags and worn brushes were a proper grooming and bathing kit; grooming brush, curry brush, hoof brush, loofah, terrycloth towel... she levitated them in her magic and set to cleaning and grooming herself with a will. She noticed Mudpuppy staring in open-mouthed amazement. "Is something the matter, dear?"

Mudpuppy blinked. "I just ain't never seen nopony use fancy magic like that," she said.

"Surely there are unicorns living out here as well?" Rarity said as she shampooed vigorously.

Mudpuppy shook her head. "Not particular like," she said, looking away idly.

"Well what about your own magic? Hasn't anypony taught you?"

Mudpuppy's head hung lower. She actually looked guilty at the mention of her magic. "Not particular like," she mumbled.

Rarity was astonished. "You mean you haven't learned any magic at all?" she exclaimed.

"Oh, I kin do a few things, an' whatnot," Mudpuppy said. Her horn lit up, leaking a few sparks. "Just... not all fancy stuff, like a lady like you can. Not very much at all." She looked downcast. "Not much fer it. Mammaw says it's cause I'm a pegacorn."

"A what?" Rarity blinked.
Ducking her head, acting almost ashamed, Mudpuppy lifted the side of her dress and stuck her wing out from underneath. "A pegacorn," she said. Her voice was almost a whisper. She tucked her wing back under her dress. "I got borned all wrong-- nuther a pegasus nor a unicorn-- so my magic don't work right. Cain't barely do magic, cain't fly a-tall. Ain't spose to let anypony know. Mammaw says it ain't my fault, but.. some folk wouldn't unnerstand." The filly looked away. "I'll go see 'bout scrubbin' out yore clothin' a bit..." and she trotted off.

Rarity was baffled. She'd never heard of such a thing. Could she have been wrong...? She cast the Alicorn detection spell on Mudpuppy as she walked away. No, there it was, the positive resonance ringing clear as a silver bell. This girl was an alicorn, Rarity would bet her hooves on it. She'd bet her entire spring line on it! But the child thought she was some sort of cripple? Something fishy was going on, here. "Methinks her Mammaw and I need to have a word," Rarity muttered. She emerged from the tub, wrapping a towel around herself.

Elsewhere in the swamp, the search for the rocket-propelled princess was proving slow going. The initial trail was easy enough to follow; it was a beeline several miles straight into the bayou, following furrowed mud, broken branches, and lost accessories. But said trail stopped quite suddenly at the edge of a rather large patch of open water. By that point they had found Rarity's hoofshoes, jewelry, and approximately one third of her ball gown, and most distressingly, her vanity purse with her magic compact. "Without this," Marigold said unhappily, "She has no way to contact us." she dropped the dripping bag in the front of the swamp boat.

There was bubbling from below and a sea pony surfaced. "No sign of her below," he said, tossing the water from his mane. "She's not in the pond, at any rate. She most likely swam to the nearest shore and went looking for help."

"I'll tell the pegasi to fly the perimeter of the pond, look for signs," Jade Blossom said.

"Tell 'em to take care. I saw signs of kappas down there." He pointed an admonishing hoof. "Remember-- get them to spill the water out of the bowls on their heads and they're helpless. A kick to the chin will do it."

Jade Blossom nodded as the sea pony dove back down. She looked over at Sweetiebelle. The princess’ little sister had been adamant about coming along, dangerous swamp or no dangerous swamp. "Don't worry," she said. "Princess Rarity is an Alicorn; there are few things foolish enough to take her on, and none that could be a real threat. She'll be fine."

Sweetiebelle gnawed her lip. "I'm not worried about that," she confessed. "But she's gonna need therapy after we scrape all the mud off her." She leaned over the gunwale and shouted into the distance. "Hang on Rarity. We're coming!!"

The search party continued its sweep. What none of them could have known, and if they had, couldn't have taken into account, was that an alicorn that did not wish to be found, could not be found-- and Rarity was in the company of a young, confused and troubled little alicorn who most emphatically did not want to be found...
Rarity minced her way into the ramshackle cabin, ragged towels wrapped around her barrel and her mane. She had a great number of questions on her mind; about Mudpuppy, in particular, her Mammaw, her family, her... peculiar situation out in this swamp... all those questions disappeared from her mind in a wink when she got a look at the inside of Mammaw's shack.

Bottles. Bottles everywhere, every size, shape and color, filled with liquids of every tint. Bottles, tubes, boxes, little ceramic pots and crockery jars, jam jars, canning jars. Dried herbs of every type imaginable, potted herbs growing in every windowsill. She spotted the tools of the herbalist's trade as well, familiar to her from many visits to Zecora's hut over the years-- mortar and pestle, scales, pruning knives, measuring cups and droppers...

Her original mission in coming to the swamp bloomed in her memory. Hope suddenly surged. "Miss, um, Mammaw? Are you an--" before Rarity could say 'alchemist' the elderly pony materialized in front of her and jammed a spoonful of... something... into her mouth. Rarity glurked, gagged and swallowed. Whatever-it-was burned and fizzed all the way down.

"My pepper-up potion," the crone said. "Keep ye from gittin' the faiblesse from all dat swampwater."

"Emphasis on the pepper," Rarity wheezed, tears gushing from her eyes. She swore she could feel smoke puffing out of her ears.

"You city ponies kin be tetchy," Mammaw said. "Best t' be a scoshe pre-ventytive."

Rarity was busy struggling to acclimate to the fizzing liquid fire bubbling its way through her system. "So you're a potion maker?" she managed to choke out.

Mammaw nodded, a grin creasing her wrinkles. "Best in de bayou," she said, with pride. "You got an ail or an ill, ole Mammaw got de thing for it. I know every herb an' root in this swamp."

"Fabulous!" Rarity gasped in relief. "Please, Mammaw, you have to help me--"

"Thought we was," Mammaw said.

Rarity shook her head. "There's a reason I came to the swamp," she said. "There's a little filly in Neigh Orleans-- and a dozen others like her-- who is terribly ill. If I do not find a particular plant to treat her, she may very well die."

Mammaw immediately looked grave. "What ails de chile?"

"We believe she was bitten by a Hinkypunk," Rarity said. "Fever, weakness, lethargy, and a faint glow like foxfire, especially around her horn."

Mammaw grunted in recognition. "Grave Candle," she said. "Poor chile not know better den to chase de swamplight, eh?" She tsked, and turned to her shelves of bottles and began rifling through them. "I treated dat often enough. One herb to treat dat, sho nuff... oh psha!" she exclaimed suddenly. She pulled down an open jam jar and held it up in disgust. All that was in it was a single dried plant.

Rarity peered at it. Sure enough, she could see the heart-shaped pods. "Yes, that's it!" she exclaimed.
"It... oh dear, that's all?"

"Eh, run out agin," Mammaw muttered. "Been a while since I sent out Mudpuppy for it." She saw Rarity's distraught expression and patted her on the shoulder with a hoof. "Oh now, don't fret none. We'll set ye up right fine. We jest need t' fetch more. Mudpuppy!" she screeched over one shoulder. The gangly filly came galloping in. Mammaw held out the jar to her. "Ah'm outta Heart an' Hoof agin. Go take Miss, ah, Rarity here an' bring back a passel."

"How much?" Mudpuppy asked.

"As much as ye kin git," Mammaw said. "Two full baskets at least. G'wan, now. Time's a-wastin."

Mudpuppy ran out the door. Mammaw looked over at Rarity. "Thar's a cotton sundress by the door," she said, pointing to a clothes chest. "Tain't no fancy paints, but it'll keep the skeeters off ye."

"Er, thank you," Rarity said, automatically moving over to the chest. She pulled the dress out with her magic. Not ugly, really, just... uber-minimalist, she told herself. It was barely more than a tube of cotton, with holes for the head and forelegs. And none for wings. ... and neither Mudpuppy nor Mammaw had even made note of the fact Rarity had wings herself. She realized with a start that due to one thing or the other--- being covered with mud, buried in soapsuds, or cocooned in towels-- neither of her hostesses had seen her wings.

She decided to accept it... but not due to any "skeeters." Some niggling instinct was telling her to not reveal her wings just... quite... yet. Worldview-shattering revelations later; lifesaving medicine first. She slipped into the sun dress while Mammaw's back was turned. She spotted a pair of basket-panniers and threw them on as well, hiding her wings further. "Wait for me, Mudpuppy dear!" she called. Before she trotted out the door, she looked back at Mammaw. The ancient nag was already puttering about, gathering ingredients around a kettle and muttering to herself. "Mammaw... when we get back I would like to speak to you. About Mudpuppy."

Mammaw stood still for a moment. "Y' saw her wings, I reckon," she said quietly. Rarity didn't reply. "We'll talk, den. When y' git back. I spose dat we'll have a moment.... Not in front of de chile, please."

"Understood," Rarity said. She trotted out the door. She stepped out the door just in time for Mudpuppy to mash a straw hat down on her head. "Hmm, deja vu," Rarity muttered, looking up at the brim.

"Best wear dat, City Lady," Mudpuppy said with a cheerful grin. "De swamp birds, dey don' know you, and dey mebbe ain't so polite when dey fly over de heads of strangers."

"Fabulous," Rarity sighed.
hooves in the loam and lowered her head. Mudpuppy closed her eyes and scrunched up her face, obviously concentrating. Rarity saw a dim glow around the filly's horn... and around her hooves?

There was a rustling all around them. All around them the undergrowth began to move. As Rarity watched, shoots began spiraling up out of the soil. She stood, slackjawed, as leaves unfurled and blossoms opened, months of growth unfolding before her eyes in mere minutes. Within moments the clearing was filled end-to-end with a crop of Silphium.; everywhere she looked, the waving fronds of a plant that had been vanished from the rest of Equestria for nearly a thousand years.

The other plants growing there had been stimulated as well. The few ankle-high ferns were now towering enormous fronds straight out of a primordial jungle. Blooms of myriad plants were everywhere, on vine and branch and stem. Even the foliage of the trees seemed thicker and more lush. Mudpuppy sighed and stretched, opening her eyes and looking at the fruits of her labor with satisfaction. *Earth pony magic*, Rarity thought. *Earth pony magic, or I'm a codfish.* "My word," she said faintly.

Mudpuppy looked bashful. "Sorry it took so long," she said. "I go any faster and it hurts de soil and de plants." She grumped in mild chagrin. "My magic is so darn slow..."

"Slow, she says," Rarity muttered, staring down into an orchid bloom the size of her head. "My dear, you seriously need some self-esteem boosters."

"G'wan," Mudpuppy said, waving a hoof dismissively. But Rarity could tell by her blush she was pleased. "A fancy-educated unicorn could prolly do dis every day an' twice on Sundays."

"No," Rarity said sincerely. "No, they couldn't."

The two began filling their baskets.

---

When they returned to the shack, Mammaw took the plants and set to work. She sent Mudpuppy out to play and set to dividing the Silphium up, root, stem, leaves, and pods. Rarity stood by while she worked, ostensibly to lend a hoof, but she found herself spending far more time listening.

"Roundabout a dozen years ago," she said, her voice as soft as the croaking frogs outside, "us ponies out in the bayou had a wee bit of a bumper crop o' foals on de way. Roundabout a dozen young couples, glowin' happy roundbellied mares an' dey stallions proud enough to bust dey buttons." She chuckled. "Oh, it was a happy day. Course, one or two o dem young couples took to frettin', anxious like dey tend to be, worryin' dat everyting gonna be okay wit dey foals." She finished mincing the root and added it to the bubbling kettle. She stuck a long wooden spoon in, set to stirring.

"A few went nosin' around in de big city, chattin' up wit de doctors dere. No harm in that, I spose... did hurt my pride a wee bit, me bein' de midwife round dese parts. Eh." she shrugged and crushed a few of the heart shaped pods with a mortar and pestle, dripping the juice into the brew. Her wrinkled face crumpled into a scowl. "Word got around, tho, that we had a passel o' mothers to be. Some folk saw it as an opportunity to fill they pockets."

She stirred slowly. "Roundabout comes this slick no-account, Call hisself Pro-fessor Cotton Mouth. Unicorn, skinny rake of a stallion. Tell one and all he a doctor of advanced medicine from Canterlot." Mammaw snorted. "Anypony could look at dat dandy-up couillon and tell he was a shyster. But he had a big fancy swamp wagon an' a nice shiny suit an' hat, and my he could talk up a storm, couldn't he?"
"He started sellin' 'medicine' to all de swamp folk. Had him a fancy potion, a 'Ma-ternal Vy-tality Elixir,' he called it. Gassed folks up real good. Told 'em it would make the pregnancy go smoov as silk, the mother and the foal both healthy as a herd of horses. The foals 'ud be smarter, stronger....the unicorn foals 'ud be as magical as Starswirl the Bearded and the pegasi 'ud be faster than Commander Hurricane, or so he said. Oh there weren't no end to the miracles his potion would work." Her voice shook a little. "Some ponies were leery, but bout a dozen expectant mares, an' bout a couple dozen more lookin' to be, went for it. Bought him out of stock.

"I knowed summat was bad wrong wid dat muck when I looked at it. Nasty, green glowin' stuff. But he blowed smoke about how dat meant it was potent..." she stopped and shook her head. "Dey chucked it back, cupful every day like he tole dem. Dey get sick, he blame it on mornin' sickness. Dey get feverish, or faint, he say it show de medicine workin....But he was so slick, so quick wid dat water moccasin tongue... even I stopped questioning 'im."

"Few month later, he pull chocks and leave. Tell everypony he gotta go back to de palace, on royal command..."

"One month after dat, de fust baby was..." Mammaw's chin crumpled. "...stillborn."

Rarity gasped faintly. "I hope you don' nevah see nuthin like dat, cher," Mammaw said. "Dat foal... she come out all wrong. Crumpled little horn, a pair o' little wings, growin' out all crooked... like somepony tried to make a foal outta clay, couldn't make up dey mind, and threw it away befo' dey finish."

"Den de rest come, seem like one born eb'ry udda day, like a string o' firecrackers. All like that-- not one thing nor de udder..Bent or broken, blind, lame, or wuss. Couple live for a few days; one colt, he live for t'ree years, then summat wen' wrong wid his heart..." A tear rolled down one wrinkled cheek. "We gathered up dat no-account's poison an' destroyed it, but de wickedness was already done. Only two Cottonmouth babies survive. Little colt name o' Twig... 'es as stout as two sticks, But 'e got two bony little batpony wings growin' crooked outta his back--- no webbin' atween the fingers. An' my granddaughter, Mudpuppy."

She added a few drops of liquid from an amber bottle and finished stirring. "Her momma died givin' birth," Mammaw said. "An' I thought her Pa gon' do the same. Dat, or he gon' run off to find dat Cotton Mouth an' kill him, den maybe kill himself..." she sighed wearily. "But he dint. E stay wid us. Two years later a Cragodile get 'im. I tink de only ting he die regrettin' was dat 'e din't find dat son of a snake an' make him pay." She set aside the spoon and banked the fire under the kettle, and left it to simmer.

"She been livin' wid me ever since den. It been hard on her. On little Twig, too. The other ponies... dey not so kind. Not mean or ought... but dey stand offen' away. I tink seein' her an Twig remind dem of de mistake dey made trustin' dat "Pro-fessor;" remind dem of what dey lost." She shrugged. "It's why she covers up dem wings. She don' want ponies to remember she's a.... cripple. It hurts too much."

Rarity's mind raced. No wonder that Mammaw thought her granddaughter was deformed. There was no way of course that this reprehensible Cotton Mouth's elixir had made an alicorn. It was probably the peril to her very life that had forced Mudpuppy to ascend while still in the womb. The poor thing had grown up thinking she was... defective. This was going to be the best news she'd ever given anyone. "Mammaw," Rarity said gently. "Mudpuppy isn't a cripple."

Mammaw snorted. "Gwan," she said scornfully. "Lemme guess, you mean she's 'Handy-capable.'"

Rarity rolled her eyes in amusement. "I mean what I said. She's not a cripple."
"G'wan witcha," Mammaw said irritably. "I ain't total blind. I kin see dat horn and dem wings on 'er. I kin see what she is-- poor half-an-half, neither fish nor fowl..."

"All three in one, actually," Rarity said calmly. "Earth Pony, Pegasus and Unicorn."

"G'wan. Ain't no pony like dat except--" Mammaw's eyes went so round they actually peeked out from between her facial creases.

Rarity chuckled. "Got it in one, Mammaw. She's an alicorn."

Mammaw froze for a moment. "OH PSHAW, G'WAN!" she said. "I'm an old fool, not a TOTAL one! You Big City unicorns got dat horn screwed on too tight!"

Chuckling, Rarity flicked her horn over her sides, using her magic to cut slits down the side of her dress. "Well, it's a good thing I'm not a unicorn, darling, or I might have been offended," Rarity said, smirking. She struck a pose and fanned her white wings out from her sides, flaring them to best effect.

You could have heard a pin drop. Mammaw stared, her jaw hanging slack. "Allow me to properly introduce myself, darling," Rarity said. "I am Princess Rarity, the Alicorn of Generosity. I am on a mission from the crown to find other alicorns like myself. And I know one of my own kind when I see her." she smiled. "Yes. Mudpuppy is an alicorn."

Mammaw stammered. "But... her wings. Her magic...?"

"She's still young," Rarity laughed. "I can scarcely fly myself, and I'm full grown. And as to her magic-- I saw her use it. She is extraordinarily strong. I suspect that what is holding her back is that she's never been properly taught... and she's trying to channel the three different kinds of magic the wrong way." She tapped her own horn. "Such as trying to push her Earth Pony magic out through her horn?"

"Mudpuppy isn't sick. She isn't deformed. She is a perfectly normal, perfectly healthy alicorn filly. And she has a wondrous future ahead of her."

The dam broke. Tears rolled out of the old pony's dimmed eyes; she staggered forward and caught Rarity in a shockingly fierce embrace. For a brief moment no words were said.

There was a hissing from the fireplace. Mammaw squawked and broke the embrace, scuttling over to the overboiling kettle. "Oh dear, is it spoiled?" Rarity said anxiously.

"Naw, naw," Mammaw said, snuffing the fire. "It be done, atchally." She stirred the potion. "Fetch that tray of bottles over yonder." The two of them worked in silence for the next few minutes, ladling the Silphium potion into glass bottles and corks the. But Mammaw's entire bearing had changed. She still fussed and puttered like an old mare, but there was a barely-smothered aura of joy around her as she worked.

"Shall we call in Mudpuppy and tell her now?" Rarity suggested, deftly corks the vials with her magic.

Mammaw's lower lip trembled, this time with joy. "In a minute," she said. "I... I need to let dis soak in."

Rarity smiled and corked another bottle. "It can wait a moment."
Chapter 25

The astute reader may be wondering: in all this time taken with alicorn bathing, Silphium harvesting, potion brewing and exposition revealing--- where was the rescue party? What happened to the band of ponies who had set out to find their Princess who had been unceremoniously dragged off into the swamp? What was delaying them?

...At the moment, a rather large bipedal turtle with an unpleasant smile on its face.

The search party had, of course, split up into groups of three to five ponies so as to cover more ground (and water, and air) in the swamp. SweetieBelle, Southern Comfort (who had insisted on joining them), Dapper Blue (one of the stallions from Rarity's Radiant Guard, an impeccably dressed sky blue pony with a dark blue mane), Jade Blossom and Marigold had formed one party, and were as circumstances dictated the one group heading in closest to the correct direction when they had found their way blocked by a kappa.

Kappas are magical aquatic creatures with exceptionally unpleasant feeding practices. The one before them was a typical specimen, resembling a large, bipedal turtle with a long bobbly neck, a straggly-haired head with a bowl-shaped indentation in the top, and long, deceptively gangly, froglike limbs poking out of the four corners of his shell. He was smirking confidently. He didn't care that the odds were five to one against. Even if all five had been earth ponies-- and a typical earth pony could uproot an oak tree with the right harnessing-- Kappas, so long as they had water from their home pool in the bowl on their heads, were stronger than a dozen earth ponies. He fully intended to grab them, one by one, and drag them down into his pool, and didn't expect to have a lick of trouble doing it. He gave the ponies a jagged-toothed smile and waited, webbed hands folded over the moss-stained sash around his waist. Here and there in the distance they could see hollowed-out heads poking above the water, watching.

The party had been boating deeper into the swamp when they had come to a series of small pools, separated from one another by a network of grassy ridges. They had run the boat aground and started across on hoof, when the kappa had surfaced from one of the pools and blocked their way. The ponies stood frozen. "Oh dear," Southern Comfort said quietly.

"Should we fight?" Marigold said, her wings fluttering.

Southern Comfort shook his head imperceptibly. "No, he's far stronger than he looks."

"Should we run for it?" Dapper Blue muttered cautiously. He looked back to where they had left the boat run aground.

Again Southern Comfort shook his head. "These buggers are way faster than they look. We wouldn't make ten steps. And if you think you can outrun a natural swimmer in a rowboat, you're welcome to try."

Jade Blossom smiled. "Don't worry, I know how to handle these things." She looked at Sweetiebelle, who had by misfortune been in the lead when the kappa surfaced and blocked the land bridge they had been crossing. "Sweetiebelle? He's looking at you---"

Sweetiebelle whimpered.

"Sweetiebelle, I need you to follow my lead. When I say so, I need you to bow to him."
"Bow to him?" Sweetiebelle asked.

"Yes. As deep as you can. Okay? Everypony, follow Sweetiebelle's lead." Jade Blossom cleared her throat. "Presenting her royal Grace, Duchess Sweetiebelle, Sister of Princess Rarity, Alicorn of Generosity and co-ruler of Equestria..."

Sweetie took her cue. She bowed deeply at the foreleg, lowering her horn. Behind her the grownups did the same, as solemnly as they could manage.

The kappa's smirk turned to a scowl. Nevertheless, he folded his webbed hands before him and bowed deeply. The water in his bowled head spilled out, trickling down his face.

Jade Blossom did a little hop, smiling triumphantly. "Hah! That did it! He's weak as a kitten now! Now we--"

"HAIIKEEBA!" Sweetiebelle shrieked. She grabbed a nearby rock in her magic and brought it up in a sweeping arc. It caught the kappa right in the point of his lowered chin before rocketing into the sky. The blow was so fierce it snapped his head backward against the hump of his shell. Stunned, the kappa spun about and flopped backward off the land bridge. He landed back in the pool he'd emerged from with an enormous splash and promptly sank out of sight. Sweetiebelle jumped up and down, cheering. "Yeah! He went down like a PUNK!"

Jade Blossom grimaced and pulled the filly back to her. "That he did, Sweetie," she said unhappily. "Because all the water in his bowl spilled out." The water in the pool boiled, and the kappa surfaced. He looked mad. "Unfortunately he fell back in the water and now it's full again..."

Sweetiebelle stopped bouncing. "Oooops..."

"Exactly."

"He looks mad," somepony murmured.

"Yes, yes I'd say he's pretty mad..."

The kappa stood in water up to its waist, glaring at them. With slow, deliberate motions it reached into its sash, pulled out a ceramic pot lid, and clapped it firmly on its concave head. It then took a scrap of cloth and tied it firmly down.

"Now that's different."

"oh dear..."

At that precise moment Sweetiebelle's rock, which had rocketed skyward after clipping the kappa on the chin, reached the apex of its flight and came plummeting back down. With a loud CRACK it struck the kappa's head square in the center of the ceramic lid. Bits of pottery and pond-water went everywhere. For a moment the monster stood there, the stone wedged in the concave dent on top of its head. Then it's eyes crossed and with a rather goofy smile it slowly toppled over. This time, it did not resurface.

The ponies regarded the ripples where the monster had sunk. A few bubbles floated up and popped. "Well I do believe it would be a good idea to move along," Southern Comfort said. Some more or less unanimous agreement and the group began making their hasty way across the swamp again, hastily bowing to the ponds in every direction as they went. (1)

They were a healthy distance away from the ponds when to their alarm they heard a scream. "My
word, some mare's in trouble!" Southern Comfort said.  

"Omigosh, did they run into the kappas?" Sweetiebelle said, distressed.  

"I think we aim to find out," Dapper Blue said, drawing a wicked-looking rapier from under his dress jacket. Concerns about unseen kappas were quickly forgotten. The adults readied their magic and their weapons(2) and raced in the direction of the sound.  

What they found was a rather unsettling tableau. A pair of earth ponies, a yellow stallion with a scruffy brown mane and a greatly pregnant tan colored mare with a cream colored mane, were cornered in a flatbottom swamp boat by yet another kappa. The turtle-toad was holding onto the front of the boat with its long skinny arms, leering and making beckoning motions towards the stallion. The stallion, strangely enough, was holding a carving knife and some sort of vegetable.  

"Don't!" the mare was beseeching him.  

"It's the only way," the stallion said in reply. "He'll let you go if I do this. Please... just tell me what--tell me what you were going to name the baby." Even from the shore, the rescue party ponies could see the haunting look in his eyes. The mare, weepy eyed, started to speak, when Southern Comfort interjected.  

"I say, what all's goin' on hyar?"

Hope flashed in the two earth pony's eyes. "Oh thank the Maker," the stallion said. "Please, y'gotta help us-- he's demandin' a toll, an' we only got two cucumbers!" He held up the vegetables in question.  

This was greeted by everypony on shore with baffled expressions. All save two ponies, that is; Jade Blossom and Southern Comfort seemed to catch the gist of it. "But there are only two of you," Southern Comfort called back.  

The mare on the boat groaned suddenly and clutched her belly. "...Three," she corrected painfully. Southern Comfort swore. Sweetiebelle looked at Jade. "Cucumbers?" She said under her voice.  

Jade lowered her voice so only the others nearby could hear. "Kappas have some ghastly appetites. But they love cucumbers more than anything. You can buy safe passage past them with a cucumber. And you can buy safety for a newborn foal by carving the foal's name in the cucumber and tossing it in their pond." Another groan echoed across the water. " Jade's expression didn't change but her eyes slitted in anger. "This one probably sensed the mare was going into labor and decided to jump the gun. If he doesn't get a cucumber for each of them, he'll hold them hostage until it's born-- and then take whomever didn't get one."

Sweetiebelle gasped, her hoof to her mouth. "You mean he'll grab the baby and--" she looked sickened.  

Jade nodded. "If I don't miss my guess, the father was about to give him one for the mother, and one for the baby... and sacrifice himself."

"We gotta help them!" Sweetiebelle said, starting to panic.  

"As you command, your Grace," Dapper Blue said, steel in his voice. "You!" he shouted to the stallion on the boat. "Throw me the cucumber!" The stallion hesitated; it was easy to see what he was thinking; if he lost a cucumber then their situation would be even more dire-- "Trust me!" Dapper urged. Biting his lip fearfully, the stallion tossed the cucumber to him. The kappa followed it
with greedy eyes, making a halfhearted motion as if tempted to try and snatch it out of the air. Dapper caught it deftly. He turned his back and began carving it with his dagger. Curious, Sweetiebelle leaned in to see what he was doing. She saw him quickly hollow out the center of the cucumber and stuff something shiny and red down inside. "Ma'am?" he shouted over his shoulder. "What's the baby's name going to be?"

There was a pause. "Jay," she said. "Just... Jay." Dapper Blue deftly carved the name in the cucumber's skin. He turned around and held the cuke up, waving it like a dog treat. He whistled two or three times.

"Here boy! Want the cuke? Want the nummy nummy cucumber?"

Hostages forgotten, the kappa let the boat go and turned to face Dapper, licking his lips with a slimy tongue. "Well, here you go boy!" Dapper said, and lobbed the cucumber into the air.

The kappa stretched out its long skinny neck and snapped the cucumber out of the air in one bite. There was a loud vegetabley crunch and the cuke was gone. For several seconds the kappa stood there, smirking and licking its lips. Then its eyes bulged, its hands went to its throat and fire and steam began gushing from its mouth. It thrashed about, tongue flailing, its steamkettle howl rising on an ascending note.

Then its head exploded.

That was it. Just a loud, deafening report and its head was gone in a red mist. The headless body staggered for a step then toppled over into the water. All around, the chirping of unseen frogs and crickets(3) ceased; then resumed again, far fainter and subdued sounding.(4)"Good Lawd," Southern Comfort hastily used his magic to push the corpse out into the deep water, where several gators could be seen homing in on the unexpected snack. "You Royal boys doan' fool roun'. What WAS that?"

Dapper Blue reached into his jacket and pulled something out of the inside pocket. He held it out. It looked like a shiny red chili pepper, except that it was oddly wrinkled, so that it looked like it had a gnashing grimace and two bulging, angry eyes. "The Canterlot gardeners have been getting some... interesting results crossbreeding plants with Poison Joke pollen," he said coolly. "You should see what the zucchini does."

Sweetiebelle, to be certain, was shocked to her innocent little core. "You killed him," she breathed in horror.

Dapper Blue could see where this was going. He finished brushing off his lapels(5) and addressed the little duchess gently. "Indeed I did," he said. "I am a plainclothes guard, your Grace. I don't have any armor or shield or spear. I can't just batter a threat into submission. That's not what I'm for. I'm a Black Flag specialist. I'm trained to take out my targets hard, fast, and permanently, when necessary."

"And it was necessary? To kill him?" The question was sincere; a child yearning for clarity.

"It was going to eat a baby. What would you say, your Grace?" Dapper Blue answered calmly.

Sweetiebelle looked out over the waters to where the gators were tussling over their prize and shuddered. But her eyes were fierce. "Yeah," she said with finality. "Yeah. He was asking for it."

In the meanwhile the swamp boat had drifted to the shore. The group was moving to aid the couple on board. "And who might you two be?" Southern Comfort said. "And what are you doing out here with her in this condition?"
The stallion spoke up. "They call me Tater Salad," he said. "This here's mah wife, Pecan Praline--" he pronounced it 'PRAH-leen'-- "An' she's as sweet as her name, I ga-ron-tee." He smiled back at his wife, who despite her discomfort returned it. "An' her condition's wut brought us out here in de fust place. We was tryin' to git to de big 'ospital in de city, but--" he jerked his head in the direction of the gator buffet that used to be their kidnapper.

"I see," Southern Comfort said. "Well I've got bad news and good news." He indicated back the way his group had come. "There's all sorts of kappa pools between here and there. And I adjudge that even if there weren't--" the mare moaned again in pain--"Your wife is too far along to make it." Tater Salad spat over the side of the boat and gave a muffled oath. "The good news is I happen to be a doctor," Southern Comfort said. "If we can get someplace with a roof and clean water, I can deliver that foal for you."

The look of relief that spread across both their faces was marvelous to behold. "Thank the Maker," Tater Salad said.

"Is there any place near...?" Southern Comfort said

Tater Salad nodded. "Gumbo's Jetty," he said. "Few houses, Gumbo's boathouse and shack, not much else... but dey good folk, dey let us use a room dere. De closest ting we got to a town, out here."

"Then that is fortunate," Jade Blossom said. "We are searching the swamp for a lost pony. Do you think she might have gone there?"

Tater Salad hemmed and hawed. "Could be. Most everypony what go tru de swamp end up dere, evenchally."

Praline let out a much louder groan. "Ah doan mean to be a pest," she said in a somewhat aggrieved tone, "But y'all might want to hurry up an' git me that!" The ponies present took the hint and piled aboard the boat. It was thankfully a good roomy craft, halfway to being a barge, almost. It was propelled by an enormous caged fan in back; once everypony was aboard Tater Salad and Dapper Blue took to the pedals, cranking the fan up to a dull roar. Soon they were skimming through the swamp at a fair clip, leaving a white wake behind them.

1) They scarcely needed to bother. The other kappas were laughing too hard.

2) Marigold wasn't the only pony to recieve one of Rarity's "custom" outfits.

3) Much of which was actually unseen kappas commenting to each other.

4) Closest kappa-to-Equestrian translation would be "holy @#$%^@ did you see that...."

5) Magic stain-proofing, paid for out of his own salary, didn't keep bits of things from flecking him. We shan't speculate on bits of what, at this time.
Chapter 26

Rarity and Mammaw had just bottled the last of the precious brew when a loud burring sound came from outside. Rarity raised her head, puzzled. It sounded rather like Pinkie Pie's old flying machine, she thought. Or like Sweetiebelle and her friends when they were tearing about town in that wagon--

"Mammaw!" Mudpuppy came galloping in. "Gator Pear and Twig are here!"

This breaking bit of news was somewhat diminished by the fact that the one pronouncing it was splattered clear up to her hocks in mud. Rarity let out a strangled squawk at the mess; Mammaw merely clicked her tongue and grabbed a washrag. "Chile, what I tell you bout trackin' mud in de house after playin' at mudpies?" she scolded, wiping Mudpuppy's legs down with the wet rag.

"But Mammaw, it's Gator Pear an' Twig, alla way here from Gumbo's Jetty," Mudpuppy insisted as she was lovingly mauled with soap and water. "Dey was sayin' dere be a bunch o' fancy city folk like her in a search party--" here she nodded at Rarity.

Comprehension illuminated Rarity's face. "Aha! That must be the others, looking for me," she said. "How fortuitous! We can go to this Jumbo Getty or wherever it is and--" she glanced down at Mudpuppy's tangled mane and let out an almighty shriek of horror. In a twinkling the frayed fashionista had her back pressed against the wall of the shack. She continued to squeal in horror, pointing a shaking hoof.

"Whaaa?" Mudpuppy said, baffled. "Oh, them," she said. "Them's just my li'l swamp friends. They won' hurt nuthin." Coiled up in her moss green mane were two or three swamp critters. There were two or three salamanders. A large bullfrog squatted on her head and at least two garishly colored tree frogs were dangling from her mane.

Mammaw gave Rarity a gimlet eye. The fussy mare had ascended a handy chair and was doing her best to balance on one hoof and curl up in a ball at the same time. "Ah doan' think that matters too much to her," she said to Mudpuppy. "Goan now, put yer li'l friends back outside."

Mudpuppy rolled her eyes and lowered her head, shaking it gently. The frogs and salamanders dismounted. Mudpuppy chirped and croaked at them, nodding toward the open door. The little herd of creepy crawlies chirped back and promptly hopped and slithered out the door. "They's gone now, Miss," she said to Rarity, a hint of contempt in her voice.

Rarity visibly relaxed. "Well now that's better," she said, lowering herself carefully to the floor. "No offense, dear, I'm sure your little friends are perfectly charming little creepy crawly bug eyed slimy--" she forcibly stopped herself and ventured a shaky smile. "Charming.... little... creatures." She shuddered in suppressed horror. "Now what was that you were saying about your visitors?"

"It's right important!" Mudpuppy said. "Pecan Praline's havin' her baby, right now!"

"Sakes alive, why din't y' say dat fust?" Mammaw exclaimed. She pulled out a ratty carpetbag from under her work counter and began dropping bottles and potions in it. "Go an' tell Gator Pear I'll be ready in a scoche." Mudpuppy galloped out the door. Mammaw watched her go. "Yonder goes her Highness, Princess Mudpuppy," she chuckled wistfully. "C'mon, yer Highness, ah got a foal to deliver, an' you got folks to reunite wid." She shuffled out the door with Rarity right behind.

This did work out to her advantage, Rarity thought. If she was right, her entourage was waiting for
her at this "Gumbo's Jetty." And apparently it was the community center; it would be the perfect place to make one or two little royal announcements...

When they got outside, Rarity saw Mudpuppy prancing about with a dusky grey colt-- a batpony pegasus, clear enough to see; the dusky grey coat, cat-slit eyes and tufted ears were hard to mistake, even if the wings at his side were webless and shrunken. Rarity felt her heart break a little at the sight. Drawn up on shore was a wide, flatbottomed boat with a pedal-powered fan mounted on back; an avacado-green earth pony with a rather horrifying set of pronounced gap teeth was tending it. "Bonjour, Mammaw Catfish," he said, waving. "I sure am glad you're home."

"Where else would ah be?" Mammaw cackled. "Down in de Quarter, hootin' fer beads?"

Gator Pear roared with laughter. "C'mon, Mammaw, they's a momma-to-be waitin' for ye!" He motioned for everypony to climb aboard. Once the mares and foals had climbed in, he pushed the boat out into the water, hopped aboard, and began peddling for all he was worth. "Next stop, Gumbo's Jetty!"

They arrived at the Jetty shortly. It was a rather ramshackle looking U-shaped dock, jutting out into the bayou waters some hundred yards. Tin roof and tarpaper shacks were tacked on with abandon, some up on the dock, others on the piles below, so low their front doors were almost level with the water. At the center, sitting on the shoreline between the two arms of the dock was a large two-story structure that, to judge by the roughly lettered sign over its sagging front porch, was "Gumbo's Place." An eclectic mix of ponies was gathered on the docks and standing out in front of the building. Among them were several of Rarity's guards.

"Yes, yes, there they are!" Rarity said. She got to her feet and waved a lace kerchief about. "Yoo Hoo, Jasmine, Marigold, Dapper Blue, here I am darlings!" They spotted her; there was a cheerful shout sent up and a concerted rush to the dock. They mobbed around her as she stepped off the dock, expressing their relief at her safe return and fussing over her in a manner she found immensely gratifying.

Even as Jade Blossom was giving her a breakdown of their own misadventures, Rarity was hit amidships by a hurtling white-and-pink missile. "RARITEEE!" Sweetiebelle squealed as the two of them tumbled to the muddy ground. To the amusement of all gathered the unicorn filly spent the next few seconds alternating between hugging the stuffings out of her big sister and chattering at a hundred words a minute about all that had been happened, muddying the two of them thoroughly. For just this once, Rarity didn't mind.

The faint sound of a mare cursing quite fluently in Cajun wafted down from one of the upstairs windows in Gumbo's Place. "Oh dear, I think that's your cue, Mammaw," Rarity said.

The elderly mare chuckled and hefted her carpetbag as she shuffled up the dock to the inn. "Eh, I got a potion or two that'll make things a li'l easier on the poor filly," she said. "Hold on, chile, Mammaw's comin'."

As Mammaw hove out of sight, Rarity started organizing her little group. "First off, I need to find someplace to clean up. Again." She sighed and looked down at herself. "I want to look my best... well, as good as possible... I'm going to have a few announcements to make..."

"We'll get a room, your Highness," Marigold said.
"Just a second," Dapper Blue said. He pulled out a skyrocket and quickly launched it. It popped high overhead in a splash of blue sparkles in the shape of Rarity's cutie mark. "They'll all be here soon enough. That's the signal for 'Princess found,'" he explained.

Rarity chuckled. "Perhaps you need to send up two," she said reflectively. She glanced over at Mudpuppy and Twig. "Sweetiebelle, dear, would you do me a favor and look after Mudpuppy and her little friend while I freshen up? I think you three will get along famously."

"Sure, Rarity!" Sweetiebelle detached herself from her sister. She stepped over to Mudpuppy and Twig, who were looking rather intimidated at all the important looking people around them... and even moreso at the fussily-dressed-up filly in front of them now. "How do you do, I am Duchess Sweetiebelle," she said, curtsying like she'd been taught.

Mudpuppy eyed the overdressed little filly skeptically. "G'wan," she said.

"Nope, it's the truth," Sweetie said cheerfully. "So... what do you do for fun around here?"

Twig spoke up. "Catch bugs, chase lizards, make mudpies..." he shrugged.

"Sounds fun!" Sweetiebelle said. She shucked her dress and tossed it over a nearby dock post. "Where do we start?"

"Sweetie--!" Rarity scolded, picking up the discarded dress... but the three foals had already galloped off to find suitable jars for bug hunting. Rarity sighed and folded the little ball gown up as neatly as possible while her entourage chuckled. "Somepony please look after them," she said. "I don't want them getting into any trouble." Two of the guards bowed and trotted off after the intrepid bug-hunters.

Jade Blossom held out a rather battered-looking purse to Rarity. "We found a few of your possessions along the way, your Highness," she said. "I'm afraid not all of it, but..."

"Oh dear, well, that's better than I expected after that little ride," Rarity said. She took the purse and dug through it. "Ah well, some of my jewelry survived I see-- oh thank goodness!" She pulled out her compact; as Twilight had promised, not a scratch was on it. "Thank goodness you recovered this, I would have hated to try and replace it--" She popped open the compact and addressed the mirror inside. "Twilight! Twilight darling, I'm back!" She looked over her shoulder at her basket panniers full of Silphium potion. "And I have some simply wonderful news about the Silphium..."

It took some few hours for everything to get sorted out. Pecan Praline wasn't exactly going to pop out her baby on the spot, after all, and it took some time to call in all the scattered search party to Gumbo's Jetty. Word went out, as well; all the bayou ponies passed word along the grapevine that something right important was going down at Gumbo's Jetty, and ponies started filtering in from every direction. By twilight the jetty was packed with swampboats, houseboats and ponies and the gathering was already shaping up to be a Cajun style shindig all on its own. Lamps were lit, light garlands went up, food, drink, and musical instruments came out and everypony started celebrating--what, they didn't know, but they'd think of an excuse later.

Rarity was spending the time in her hastily-appointed room, fussing and grooming and, along the way, debriefing and being debriefed. "Kappas? How horrid! I thought the Princess-- ah, that is, Princess Celestia-- had wiped them out centuries ago!" she said from the shower.

It was something of an awkward situation; for some bureaucratic reason the Fabulosity had been
unable to simply fly over the swamp and make its amenities available. Rarity was forced to having make do with the creature comforts of one of Gumbo's "guest suites." Which, were she to judge correctly, were lucky to have running water. As it was she had quite a wait while her staff had evacuated several stubborn bullfrogs from the tub— and she didn't want to think about where they found the water moccasin.

She had finally, reluctantly, gotten in the cracked ceramic tub and did her best to shampoo under the anemic flow from the shower head. She made a point to get out as quickly as possible; the water was so hard she could taste the rust. She shuddered to imagine what it was doing to her roots... dripping, she towelled off and made her way back to the bedroom. "It's bizarre to find a nest of them out here in the bayou, to say the least."

Marigold nodded in response to her exclamation. "Indeed, your Highness. But there always seems to be some Dark Lord wannabee somewhere who brews up a clutch of eggs.... Kappas are just too useful as geased slaves, nasty eating habits or not."

"Slaves?" Rarity said. She made herself comfortable in the (now magically deloused, whether it needed it or not) queen sized bed, while she and her lady guards did their best to spruce up each other's makeup and hairdos to something tolerable.

Dewblossom nodded as she dabbed polish on Rarity's hoof. "If you pour rice wine into a kappa's bowl, it becomes your slave for life," she said. "Of course then you have to feed it..." everypony present shuddered.

How horrid," Rarity said.

"Ask me how an inugami is made sometime, your highness," Jade Blossom said. "There's a reason Dark Lords are called Dark."

"Most likely some fool out in the swamp decided a few turtle-demon slaves was just the thing, corrupted some turtle eggs, and then didn't check his kappa's nests too closely," Dapper Blue said from where he stood looking out the window at the darkening swamp. "Next thing you know, you got a colony of the things out in the bayou."

"Ugh. Let us talk of more pleasant things, for now," she said. "Any word on that young mare in labor?"

"Nothing yet," Jade Blossom said. "Which I suppose is a good thing at this point." She gnawed her lip worriedly.

"Well, she's in good hooves," Rarity reassured her. "Doctor Southern Comfort is highly respected and to judge by the expressions of relief on everypony's face when she arrived, so is Mammaw."

Almost in response, through the walls came an echoing groan of a pony in labor. "At least she stopped screaming and cursing," Dapper Blue said idly. "I suspect Mammaw has a few 'calming elixirs' in that bag of hers."

"She does. I sampled one or two on the way here," Rarity said. It was the only reason she hadn't left an alicorn-shaped hole in the ceiling when she'd found the water moccasin. She ignored the strange looks from the others. It was worth it; she hadn't felt this calm since high school when she'd gone grazing with a friend in that field of weeds with the five-lobed, spiky leaves.... should she mention how vivid all the colors were? No, she didn't think she should mention the colors.

"If I may ask, you said you had some announcements to make," Dapper Blue said, coughing into
one hoof. "Is there some particular reason you're waiting?"

"Timing, dear, timing." Rarity smiled and gestured in the direction the last groan of labor came from. "Besides, darling, there's a young lady having her first foal here. It just wouldn't be right to steal her spotlight from her on her special day..!"

Just then, there was a resounding slap, followed by a high, wavering cry. As one, the mares all looked at each other and squealed with glee.

Then... another slap. And a second wavering cry joined the first...

The mares all gasped. "Oh... my... stars...!" Rarity said. "It couldn't be--!"

And then... a third. Stunned silence filled the room.

A minute later a knock came at the door. It was Southern Comfort, his sleeves rolled up and his collar undone. He was drying his hooves with a towel and looked immensely pleased. "Your Majesty, I felt you ought to be the first to know," he said. "Pecan Praline and Tater Salad are the proud parents of three, yes three healthy foals. Two fillies, one colt."

Thus it was that Southern Comfort was the first pony in history to witness a Princess of Equestria and her entourage begin bouncing up and down and shrieking with excitement.(2)

They all but piled into the new mother's room, nearly getting wedged in the door. They clapped eyes on the mother and fell reverently silent. Praline was lying in bed, looking exhausted and frazzled and with a smile like the morning sun, curled up around two precious little bundles. Tater Salad was slumped in a chair next to her, beaming, his face streaked with liquid pride, bottle-feeding the third.

Mammaw was sitting off to one side, her wrinkled face creased into a knowing smile.

Praline saw them clustered at the door and brushed her frazzled mane out of her eyes. "Y-your Majesty, hello," she said. "You'll have to excuse me if I don't get up and bow."

"Quite all right," Rarity whispered, giggling. "May we come in?"

"Of course, absolutely..." Rarity and her guards crept into the room. They cooed adoringly over the foals. The colt, curled up with his mother, was an earth pony. He was a dark green with a yellowish mane. Next to him was his sister, an earth pony filly with an orange coat and gold-and-orange mane. The last one, in her father's arms, was a sky blue filly with a dark blue mane; you could see tiny wings peeping out of the blanket wrapped around her.

Tater Salad cleared his throat. "Um, we never did catch y'all's names," he said to the guards.

"Oh. Ahem." Dapper Blue cleared his throat. "Dapper Blue, of the Radiant guard." He gestured to Jade and Marigold. "Jade Blossom and Marigold, of the same."

"Where is the Duchess?" Pecan Praline asked.

"The d-- oh, Sweetiebelle," Rarity said. "She's looking after... an important young filly for me."

Tater Salad wiped his eyes and looked at them. "The Duchess and these here guards saved our lives," he said. "Saved our foals' lives. So, with your permission..." He reached over and stroked the colt's head. "Bell Pepper. F'r the little Duchess Belle."
He moved his hoof to the dozing golden filly. "Gold Blossom, after you two ladies." Marigold and Jade Blossom swapped a gleeful look.

Tater Salad looked Dapper Blue in the eye, and shared a smile with his wife as he gently patted his pegasus daughter. "And for you especially, sir-- Say hello to Blue Jay. Our first born."

Surprised, Dapper dipped his head. "It's an honor, sir," he said.

Rarity beamed. "Oh, Sweetiebelle will be thrilled," she said. "--- If you like, may I be the one to make the announcement?" Pecan Praline most definitely liked. There was a bit of kerfluffle as the babies were carefully bundled up and handed to various ponies to hold. "Oh this is so darling," Rarity gushed, giving Bell Pepper a nose nuzzle. "Oh I'm going to love this shopping trip-- baby cribs, and baby bibs, and little baby booties--"

She caught a fleeting but familiar expression crossing the parents' faces. "Ma'am... your Highness... we do appreciate the thought, but there's no need to..." Pecan Praline said hesitantly.

Ah yes. Rarity knew that look from her own parents' faces. The 'too proud', 'we-don't-need-charity' look. "Oh, it's not that," Rarity said. "It's just that whenever a child is born someplace a Princess is staying, she's expected to do make a lavish gift to the baby and the family. It would look absolutely dreadful if I didn't do something. One of those old, venerable royal traditions, don't you know." She waved a hoof dismissively.

"Excellent, I'm glad that's settled!" Rarity chirped. Jade Blossom leaned in and murmured in her ear. "Old, venerable royal tradition?" she said, corner of her mouth quirking in amusement.

"Of course, Darling; they have to start someplace, don't you know," Rarity said, arching an eyebrow. "Come along, everyone. Deuce, I wish I had my wardrobe... ah!" At that moment Gumbo's wife came in the door, carrying a stack of clean cotton sheets. Rarity snapped a couple of them up in her magic and handed it off to Jade Blossom. "Hold onto this for a moment, dear? Thank you. Now where's that purse, there are a FEW bits of jewelry in there... Marigold, please go fetch back my sister and Mudpuppy, please? It's time to make some royal proclamations, and I think she'll want to hear them..."

---

Marigold found Sweetiebelle, Mudpuppy and Twig down at the water's edge, mucking about. After some fussing and cleaning with wet naps, they were marched back to the Jetty, jars full of lightning bugs in hoof, to hear the royal announcements.

It was a mob when they arrived. Every pony in the Bayou had to be gathered at Gumbo's Place; the jetty was lit up like a carnival and music was in the air. The foals and their guards squeezed their way up to the front of the crowd-- clearing a path by way of a few pokes with a spear point-- just as Rarity stepped out on the front patio of the ramshackle building. She was flanked by Dapper Blue, Marigold, Jade Blossom, and Tater Salad. Rarity, Marigold and Jade were all carrying a tiny bundle in the crook of their front leg.

Sweetiebelle was puzzled. Rarity was all clean and neat, sure... but she was still wearing that plain white dress she'd borrowed from somewhere that covered her wings. Why hadn't she got fancied up again?
Rarity cleared her throat and cast a quick voice enhancing spell. "Attention everypony!" Her amplified voice rang out over the waters. The music tapered off, and everyone fell silent. "It is my great pleasure to introduce to you the three newest members of your little community. Allow me to present Tater Salad's and Pecan Praline's foals--- Bell Pepper," She held up the first bundle so everypony could see. Cheers and applause greeted the new foal.

Jade Blossom stepped forward and held up a golden-haired filly. "...Gold Blossom...." Rarity continued. The cheers doubled.

Then Marigold stepped up and showed them a sky blue filly with tiny wings. "...And Blue Jay!" Rarity finished. Whoops and cheers went up and more than one hat was tossed in the air. The applause was thunderous. The fillies were rapidly whisked away, to be returned to their mother-- hopefully before the sound-silencing spell around them wore off and they were woken up by the noise. Mudpuppy and Sweetiebelle were dancing with glee and even Twig was cheering. Three foals. THREE!

Before the crowds could get carried away, Rarity spoke up again. "This is not the only extraordinary event to occur here tonight," she said. The crowd, curious, fell silent. "As we all know, some few years or so past a tragedy befell your community. A charlatan passed through your village, selling a poisonous elixir to the expectant mothers here... with tragic results." Mutters of remembered anger rose; here and there a tear was shed in memory. More than one sympathetic glance was thrown Mudpuppy's and Twig's direction, to their obvious discomfort.

"What was missed was that in the middle of this tragedy, a miracle had occurred," Rarity went on. "Under other circumstances, it would have been obvious. But surrounded by heartbreak it was thought to be more of the same. An understandable mistake, but a mistake nonetheless. One which we now rectify." She looked down at Mudpuppy. "Mudpuppy, darling... please come up here."

Mudpuppy blinked and hesitated, confused. "G'wan," Twig whispered impatiently. "Don't keep the fancy lady waiting." He pushed his friend up towards the stage. Stumbling awkwardly, Mudpuppy mounted the steps and stood beside Rarity, rubbing one foreleg with the other nervously. Rarity pressed her side against her, encouraging.

"Of all the types of pony in the world, there is one that is the rarest," Rarity said. "One that carries the attributes of all three tribes; Unicorn, Pegasus, Earth pony. Of ponies, one in a million-- one in a billion!-- is born with this heritage, fully formed." Skeptical mutterings rose. "I see you know whereof I speak. And no, it is no mistake. What you mistook for a deformity was in fact just such a heritage."

"Look, lady," a voice in the crowd said, not unkindly. "We know what it looks like..."

"And I am telling you that it is precisely that," Rarity said firmly.

"G'wan, lady, how would you know?" somepony else said. A few ponies laughed.

Rarity's horn flared, and her eyes glowed white. "Because we know our own," she said, her voice echoing over the crowd. A breeze kicked up, ruffling manes and blowing hats away. One of the linen sheets carried by Jade Blossom was snapped up and began swirling around Rarity in a whirlwind of magic. There was a flash of blue-white light. When it cleared, Rarity stood before them transformed. Her hair was done up in a glorious mane-style, pinned in place with golden combs and bedecked with her tiara. the necklace that had once held her Element adorned her collarbone. Her cotton-sack dress had been replaced with a gracefully draped white toga(4) that spilled back over her spread, swanlike wings.
There was an epic silence. "Well shut mah mouth," someone out in the crowd said.

"I am Princess Rarity Belle, CoRegent of Equestria and Alicorn of Generosity," Rarity said in a voice that brooked no argument. "With my magic I sensed one of my own kindred out here in the swamp, and came to find her. And find her I have." She looked over at a slack-jawed Mudpuppy. "That's right, dear," she said with a smile.

Mudpuppy found her voice. "But... but I'm not a..."

"You are," Rarity insisted gently. She raised her voice enough to be overheard by the crowd. "You are not crippled. You are not deformed. It wasn't Cotton Mouth's elixir that did this to you. In fact, I suspect that the only reason you survived is because of what you are. You are an alicorn--"

She fanned her wings gently. "Just like me."

Mudpuppy was speechless.

Down in the crowd, Sweetiebelle was hopping with glee, too excited to even squeak. It was just like a fairy tale! Twig's eyes were as round as saucers. "No way," he breathed.

"Yes way!" Sweetiebelle giggled next to him.

Rarity fanned her wings out and lit up her horn. Magic swirled around Mudpuppy. She felt her hooves lift off the ground. There was an enormous flash of light.

When she reappeared, the transformation was astonishing. Her moss-green mane and tail had been groomed to silken tresses; her mud brown coat glowed with a warm terra cotta sheen. She was dressed in a toga(5) as well-- one much simpler than Princess Rarity's, of course, but still gleaming white -- and a tiny tiara sparkled on her head.

"Ponies of the Neigh Orleans Bayou," Rarity said. "May I be the first to present to you: Her Highness, Princess Necturus of Equestria!"

The silence that followed was thunderous....

The whoop that went up after it rattled the windows.

---

1) about the only part of her original outfit that hadn't been destroyed by her ride through the swamp.

2) And we shan't say whether Dapper Blue did the same, but if one of those shrieks was a little more manly than the others, who could blame him?

3) When the guards found out they were going to have a filly onboard, wet naps became standard supplies for all of them.

4) An Ionic Chiton, actually.

5) A Doric Chiton, in this case.
Princess Rarity had more announcements to give, but Mudpuppy didn't hear them. She left the porch, so stunned she was barely able to feel her own hooves on the ground. The moment she was off the boards and out of the literal limelight, her hooves started running.

When they finally stopped, the lights and sounds of the celebration were a distant patch of light round the bend and she was fetlocks deep in the bayou clay. She was in a little nest by the shore, a clear area surrounded by high cattails and overshadowed by a weeping willow... her and Twig's old hidey-hole, from when she'd been a tiny filly. She hadn't even known she was going there. She sat on the muddy bank, dirtying up her pretty new dress... but her head was too a-whirl to care. She sat on the shore as sympathetic frogs and turtles and salamanders gathered round and stared in the green, lily pad strewn waters while her heart and her head raced in circles.

Only her and Twig knew about this little place. It was kind of disgruntling when she was up and found a hoof-full of minutes later. One of those fancy fellers that was following Princess Rarity around came high-stepping down between the reeds to where she was. In his shadow was Twig, of course. The cheeky colt sat in the mud next to her and grinned artlessly. Mudpuppy gave him a glare. "y'all never did know when to leave well enuff alone," she grumbled.

"It's hardly his fault, your Highness," the fancy pony said, high stepping down to where she sat. "We could hardly let the newest Princess of Equestria wander off unattended, could we?" He flicked his horn and a soft carpet of grass sprang up, covering the mud; he delicately lay down on top of it, not getting a spot of mud on his fine suit. "I suppose this comes as something of a shock."

Mudpuppy only nodded, looking down at the water, idly petting a turtle that had crawled up between her forehooves. "I'm... I'm scared," she said.

Twig snorted in disbelief. "Scared? Wut fer? Yew just had a fairy tale come true! You became a PRINCESS! 'Slike every filly's dream come true!" He sat down and waved his forehooves. "I mean-- a PRINCESS!"

She turned and stuck her face in his, her worried eyes inches from his own. "And what happens now, Twig?? None o' them fairy tales tells you that! Do I gotta wear frilly clothes an' live in a castle? Am I goanna hafta marry some grody ole prince, an' bow an' scrape and..." she swallowed tearfully and looked down. "Am Ah goanna have to leave th' Bayou....and Mammaw?"

Dapper Blue considered. Honesty seemed the best policy. "For a while, at least," he confessed. "Princess Rarity wants... needs you to stay with her, at least for the foreseeable future. There are many things you have to learn about being an Alicorn; things that Mammaw Catfish can't teach you. And there is a..." he paused. "A great and important project. One that will need all the Alicorns in the world working together to happen." He smiled. "But you will be coming back to the Bayou. I promise."

"Promise?" Mudpuppy sniffled, wiping her nose on her foreleg.

Dapper Blue winced and produced a silk kerchief to wipe the filly's nose-- and leg. "Promise," he said solemnly. "After all, you're a Princess. From what I've seen Princesses get to do whatever they like.... once they learn the ropes, that is."
Mudpuppy giggled a little. "But what about Mammaw?" she said, suddenly fretting. "She'll be all alone if'n I leave."

"I think Princess Rarity is making some arrangements about that," Dapper Blue said with a smile. "Princess Rarity may seem flighty, but she's very, very thorough and covering all the little details."

"Anyway," Twig said, rolling his eyes. "We kin fuss about all that stuff later. Right now yo're missing a beaucoup party. An' de Princess airboat here too-- I d'wan't miss dat!" He tugged on her foreleg. "C'mon, nao, doan be no capo!"

"Ah ain't no capo!" Mudpuppy protested. "Ai just d'wan't git up dar an havin' to make all sort o' speechifyin' at ponies an' what not."

"Capo," Twig said decisively.

Mudpuppy shot him a scowl that would have curdled lamp oil. "I kint help if it all dem ponies starin' at me make my stomach shake like a bowl fulla bouille!"

Dapper Blue chuckled. "Don't worry, you don't have to do any 'speechifying' just yet," he said. "But they are missing you at your own party."

"'S Bell Pepper, Blue Jay an' Golden Blossom's birthday, should be their party, nawt mine," Mudpuppy grumbled.

"Well then come back an' say happy birt-day to em," Twig protested. "C'mon, quit makin' a bahbin and come back. Apple Dowdy is makin' funnel cakes!"

Mudpuppy grumbled but relented and got to her hooves.

"And besides, there's someone on the airship you'll want to meet," Dapper Blue said, discreetly magicking the mud off the hem of her dress. "A young filly from the city. You may have very well saved her life."

Mudpuppy's head whipped around. She gaped at him. "What? Aw, go to bed!"

---

Sweet Peach was drifting; half in, half out of a dream. She felt like she was floating on clouds, but not cool rainy ones--- hot, dry ones, made out of cotton and wool, stifling and hot.

She didn't open her eyes, barely stirred when somepony pressed a bottle to her lips. Something cool and bubbly trickled into her mouth and down her throat. The drink was sweet, with a bitter aftertaste, but she hardly cared; it cooled her mouth and throat so nice. The coolth spread down her throat, into her belly and all through her hot, tired body. The stifling cotton clouds went away and she was drifting on billows of cool spray...

Bit by bit, she slowly became more awake. She felt tired, tired like she'd not slept in a week and weak as a kitten. And she was lying somewhere very, very soft, with soft fluffy somethings, pillows, behind her head and a comforter like pegasus down up under her chin. Cool washcloths were resting on her forehead, wrapped around the base of her horn. Where was she?

Slowly she opened up her eyes. She was in bed, that much she knew, but whose? She'd never seen such a large, soft fluffy bed before, much less slept in one. Four poster, too. There were ponies standing around the bed. She focused her blurry eyes; she recognized Doctor Comfort right away...
then her eyes focused on the pony next to her. It was an earth-brown freckled filly with moss-green hair, sparkling green eyes and a gaptoothed smile. There was a sleepy looking rainbow-colored newt draped over her ear. She was wearing a pretty white dress with her wings peeping out, and a little tiara sparkled on her head, right behind her horn.

In an instant Sweet Peach went from sleepy eyed to round-eyed awake. She sucked in a breath like a vacuum cleaner. "A Princess????" she squeaked, her voice rasping.

"More than one, darling."

Sweet Peach turned her head; there stood Mama and Papa and Princess Rarity... a few more memories from the past few days tumbled into her brain. "Oh, yeah..." Sweet Peach said, rubbing her eyes. It was probably rude, she worried, but Princess Rarity was still smiling. So were Mama and Papa, but why were they crying too? She jerked her head back toward the mossy-haired pony. "But who are you?" she asked, confused.

A familiar head of curly pastel locks appeared over the edge of the bed. "This is Princess Necturus!" Sweetiebelle piped up. "She made the medicine that made you better!"

"Well, not exactly herself," Princess Rarity amended. "But it's thanks to her that we found the plant it's made from. You and all the others are going to be just fine." The moment Sweet Peach had shown signs of improvement, Pegasus couriers had raced the bottles of the precious brew to the city hospital and to every sick pony on the list.

"Done chased a hinkypunk, dintcha," Princess Necturus said knowingly in a soft swamp drawl. "Oughter know better'n that. They're mean lil buggers."

"I thought it was a firefly," Sweet Peach said meekly. "Was that what made me sick?? It was just a little bug bite. I barely even felt it!"

"Well you know better now," Doctor Comfort chuckled. Sweet Peach wasn't paying much attention; she was too busy staring wide-eyed at her savior.

"Are you a new princess?"

Princess Necturus... Mudpuppy... blushed. "Seems so," she said, fluttering her wings shyly.

Sweet Peach thought this over. "My," she said finally. "What they can't do these days..."

Doctor Comfort nearly choked.

Sweetiebelle couldn't contain herself anymore. She hopped up and threw her hooves around Mudpuppy's neck. "Oh, we are going to have so much fun!"

"And is she?" Celestia chuckled from her mirror frame. "Having fun, that is."

"Oh, she's having a wonderful time now," Rarity said, lounging in her divan in her favorite bathrobe with a mimosa. Another "Mirror Meeting" was underway. "Once we had a few things squared away that she was fretting about."

"What things?" Twilight asked.

Rarity waved her hoof about grandiosely, coming perilously close to sloshing her champagne flute.
empty. "Ohhhh, this and that," she said. "The poor dear was of course fretful of leaving her Mammaw all alone. I offered Mammaw a berth, but she refused! It seems she's something of a fixture in the bayou, with roots as deep as Granny Smith's... besides, and this is in confidence, darlings-- she told me that she wanted to give Mudpuppy a 'clean break.' 'She dun gon' hafta be learnin' all dem royal tings, an' she ain't gon' do dat wid me hoverin' over her.' Quote." Rarity looked saddened. "I could tell it was breaking her heart, but she insisted...

"Oh, the poor thing," Fluttershy said. "Wont she be all alone?"

"Not a chance," Rarity said cheerfully. "Twig is coming along, of course. The ship physicians are going to be going over Princess Necturus with a fine toothed comb, to make sure that wicked pony's potion didn't do her any lasting harm... I told them about Twig and they insisted he come along, so they could examine him for comparison. Hopefully they'll devise some sort of treatment for his own potion poisoning, mend his wings, etc. Of course the fact that it means Necturus will have one of her closest friends and playmates for company is entirely coincidental, I'm sure." She smiled as she ran her hoof around the rim of her glass.

"Necturus?" Pinkie asked, cocking her head to one side.

Twilight cleared her throat. "A particular genus of amphibian, a type of salamander... also known as a Mud Puppy."

"OoooOOOhhhh..." Pinkie intoned. She paused. "I don't get it." Twilight facehoofed.

"But what about Mammaw?" Fluttershy pressed. "She'll be all alone..."

"Oh, not in the least," Rarity said. "It seems that this little debacle has enlightened Good Doctor Southern Comfort to certain gaps and shortcomings in his medical knowledge. He's chief of staff at the local hospital, and he's going to have a steady stream of doctors and interns in and out of the swamp, studying under Mammaw's tutelage, learning the herbal folklore of the swamp. And not coincidentally keeping an eye on her, helping around her little shack, keeping her company..." Rarity sipped at her drink.

"Oh, how nice." Fluttershy smiled, relieved.

"Of course that little shack is hardly large enough for what they intend," Rarity said. "Southern Comfort is planning on opening a brand new clinic out in the bayou... courtesy of a, ahem, little royal grant?" She buffed a hoof on her robe and examined it, smiling smugly. "He and Mammaw are already thick as thieves, and Mammaw's going to be right in the middle of it all. Then there are all the ponies going out to protect-- and work on cultivating-- the Silphium..."

Twilight nodded. "I sent messages to the Academies," she said. "There are teams of botanists champing at the bit to get out there."

"I hope you realize that will be something of an extensive undertaking, Rarity," Celestia said. "Just hauling the construction materials out into the swamp will be rather laborious..."

"Then it's a good thing they're going to be laying down a road," Rarity said with a jovial grin. She noticed her champagne flute was empty and looked over her shoulder at her maidservant. "Juice me, darling." The pony procured a cocktail pitcher and proceeded to refill Rarity's glass. "Where was I? Oh yes. After getting back to town I had a little talk with certain someponies, tugged a few strings, and got them to start construction on an elevated road out to the communities out in the bayou. Very eager to please a new Princess, those chaps."
"Rarity, I know we have great power as Princesses, but you can't just bypass the local government for that sort of thing," Twilight protested.

"I can if it's a national safety issue," Rarity singsonged. "I know, I looked it up. And an infestation of inhabited territory by hostile, dangerous and-or dark magic created creatures is on the list of things that qualify, right near the top. And after all, the Guard's Royal Corp of Engineers will need to build a supply road out there, what with their mission to march out there and root out those Kappas and Hinkypunks. And when they're all done..." She gestured, indicating an imaginary road, then gasped in fake surprise. "Why I do declare! Our community has need of a road, and here one is, just lying there waiting to be used! My stars, how fortuitous!" she chortled.

"The governor and the mayor were a little unsettled at having to adjust their road maintenance to accommodate a new raised two-lane out into the bayou, but they were much happier once they learned the Guard's Royal Corp of Engineers would be doing the initial construction-- with funding from the crown." She paused as a concerned look vaguely crossed her face and waved a hoof. "Oh do just take it from my share of our little slush fund, if it's a problem. I know the nobles in Canterlot will set up a whine if it comes out of the tax revenue..."

"In light of circumstances, I think it's a very valid royal expenditure," Celestia chuckled. "But yes, let's bypass the nobles on this. No sense giving them a chance to be heel-draggers. I don't mind chipping in a share, myself." Agreement went up from the other princesses.

"Fabulous!" Rarity said, knocking back her drink. "That means we can an eye on their expense accounts. I know how government projects tend to go. Don't get me wrong, but like Mother always says: money is no object-- but we should have money's worth." She cocked an eyebrow. "Plus, we become investors."

"Investors?" Rainbow Dash said.

"Yes, in the silphium crop," Rarity said. "Or, well, the potential crop, anyway. Once they figure out how to cultivate it. For the next few decades the plant is technically under royal ownership and it now requires a license to pick, to protect from over-harvesting. Mammaw already has her Princessly permit, of course, finder's fee and discoverer's rights and all that, but everypony will be limited to a certain amount per year... except for any demonstrably grown by hoof..."

"Which will encourage every pony with a home garden or a spare window box to try their hoof, at least, at growing it domestically," Twilight concluded, with a note of admiration. "Very slick, Rarity."

"And in the meanwhile, the crown will be raking in a bundle on them fees and licenses and sharecroppin' and what not," Applejack chuckled.

Rarity sipped from her glass. "Of course, darling." She sighed. "It would be nice to be able to simply give and give without thought for the bottom line, but the simple reality is that in order for one to give, one must first receive. Our little royal piggy bank Celestia gave us is nice and plump, but it isn't bottomless. But I estimate that the bottling revenues for the silphium elixir alone will repay what I've been strewing about in this little venture, and we'll have actually made a tidy profit by the time we re-release the silphium into the public domain."

"She learns from thee, Sister," Luna noted wryly. Laughter greeted this, but no disagreement from Celestia.

"So the bayou ponies get a new road, a new medical clinic, and a Guard outpost, the kappa and hinkypunk infestation gets dealt with, science and medicine get back a long-lost miracle plant, the
Big Easy potentially gets a priceless new cash crop, and the Great Plan gets a revenue influx... and we get a brand new alicorn filly!" Twilight couldn't resist clapping her hooves in glee.

"Yeah, looks like I lost money," Rainbow Dash grumped. "Again. I was so sure that the first one would be found by... eh, never mind. Twi, tell your scaly little bookie that his bits are in the mail, wouldja?"

After the chuckles died down, Applejack gave Rarity an appraising look. "I gotta admit you surprised me, sugarcube. Y'all literally got dragged through the city by the horn, plowed through a mile of mud, hosed down in a washtub, pranced through a swamp in a cotton sack dress, saddled with a filly who carries around a half-dozen creepy crawlies in her mane for fun... I would have expected you to be a quiverin' wreck."

Rarity chuckled throatily. "There's a somewhat pharmaceutical reason for that, darling," she said. For the first time Twilight noticed that Rarity was looking a bit rosy around the cheeks. And she did seem rather boisterous for all that she'd been through... "Rarity," she said, her brow furrowing. "How many of those mimosas have you had?"

"Oh, not many..." Rarity suddenly squinted at her. "Twilight Sparkle. Are you implying that I might be intoxicated?"

Twilight blanched. "Oh no, I'm not--"

"Because I am not." Rarity cut her off. "I am not 'intoxicated.' " She downed her drink and got a refill.

Rainbow Dash eyed her through the mirror. She could see Rarity's magic control over her glass was wobbling more and more. "Rares, if you aren't drunk then--"

"The correct term is 'Smashed off my freaking plot,' darlings," Rarity said. "Don't worry, though, I intend to throw up violently later and spend tomorrow nursing a hangover. I also intend to be wondering WHY I have a hangover..." she didn't so much shudder as go into a brief all-body spasm. "...Swamp mud. Moss and mildew and pond scum in every bodily crevice... Frogs and lizards and squishy things... even now the child is assembling a terrarium for her slimy friends in Dapper Blue's green house... a 'hotel room' where the bed was only holding together because the bedbugs had linked elbows... snakes in the toilet--" She spasmed again, draining her glass. For a moment it looked like she'd go straight to the pitcher. "Mammaw had to dose me up with her nerve tonic. When that wore off I switched to cocktail mixers. At the moment I'm feeling no pain but I suspect I'll have myself a lovely little freakout once I wake up tomorrow... thank heaven I found the wet bar."

"Which brings me to another interesting realization," she said, her mood swinging about on a new heading. "I believe I've figured out how, exactly, my Element works for me now." She paused for a refill.

"...And?"

"Why it's very simple, darlings," Rarity said. This time her glass did spill a bit. "Generosity is about giving of yourself, being magnanimous to others in your proshperity. Prosperity. ahem. It also means knowing what others need, and having a way to provide it for them.. The moment I had my little surge, I knew just what that poor little sick filly needed, and was absolutely desperate to get it... and the magic went out and found it." She looked down in her glass. "Likewise my magic seemed to know precisely what I needed after my little misadventure. It led me straight to the wet bar on board
"Anyhow, once I, ah, settled my nerves, I did a little experimenting. Buck, was it easy! I can look at a pony, or even think about them, and I sort of... sort of know, you see, what exactly they need most at that moment." She waved a cautionary hoof. "Mind, it's not like a genie in a lamp or anything. It seems to be... er... vague. And rather literal minded. There was a young crewpony who was fretting about his up and coming promotion, for example, and his relationship with his filly back home--- but what he needed most in the world right at that moment was a clean tissue and a stick of chewing gum. Another needed a bit coin, somepony else needed a particular book.... the clincher was when I stumbled into Prince Blueblood and tried it on him."

"And what did he need?" Pinkie Pie said, grinning and leaning in toward her mirror.

"A swift kick in the pants." Rarity sipped her drink while the others laughed. Pinkie literally rolled out of sight, clutching her sides.

"And did you give it to him?" Luna grinned.

"Generously. Two hoof printsh, shide by shide. Launched his gaudy white plot down the hall. I blamed it on the drink." Rarity wobbled a bit. "Ooh my. Darlings, it has been a rough day or two, I do believe I need... to lie... down..." she gave an enormous unladylike yawn and toppled over. She sprawled across her divan in an awkward pose, snoring violently.

A lavender mare with a pink mane stuck her head around the corner of the frame. It was Rosemary, one of Rarity's twin hoofmaids. "Don't worry-- we switched out the champagne in her mimosas with ginger ale a while ago," she whispered. She giggled. "I think her highness needs some rest now, though." A loud snort and a mumble came from the prone princess. "I'm sure she will be up to introducing Princess Necturus to you all tomorrow. Good evening, Your Highnesses." The image in the mirror faded back to a reflection.

The rest of the group had to spend a while getting over the giggles at the former fashionista's rough and tumble experiences. When they finally calmed down, Celestia turned to address Twilight. "So, many bits of exciting news from Rarity's corner of the world," she said. "And how have you fared, my most faithful former student?"

Twilight bit her lip and rolled her eyes, but smiled a bit. "Well," she said....
Chapter 28

"HAAIAIIGH!"

Twilight's shriek split the air in the dimly lit hallway. She leapt backwards a full ten feet, flapping and scrambling, to land in Flash Sentry's forelimbs. "Don't look!" she squealed, burying her face in Flash's neck and covering his face with her wing, trying to block his view from their certain doom.

Flash staggered backward on his hind hooves, cradling the new princess in his forelimbs and flapping his wings for balance. To his relief the other guards leapt to the defense of their princess and their unfortunately encumbered captain, jumping around them to block the way, spears at the ready. "Hold!" one of them shouted.

"No no, don't anypony look at it directly! Close your eyes!" Twilight insisted. Everypony froze. They held that tableau for several seconds, eyes scrunched shut, before a youthful voice dry with derision spoke up.

"Guys... it's a statue. I don't think you have to worry." Spike gave the aforementioned statuette a poke with one claw. The "tink" of claw on stone was audible. Blushing furiously, Twilight climbed down out of Flash Sentry's arms. She gave the hapless captain of the guard a miffed look, as if blaming him for the mishap, then turned her attention back to the alarming sculpture as if the sight of her Captain annoyed her. Flash shrugged in helpless bafflement to her dragon assistant; Spike merely gave him a shrug of resignation in return.

"Why the devil is there a statue of a cockatrice in a hospital hallway?" she demanded of noone in particular.

And indeed it was; a life sized marble statue of a cockatrice. The sculpture was standing atop a marble half-pillar, its wings mantled and its thick snake tail spiraling down the pillar. It was, for some inexplicable reason, wearing thick welding goggles.

"I do apologize," said Doctor Elixir. The head physician was escorting them through the hospital. He made his way forward through the group and stood beside the statue. "I probably should have warned you before we came to this wing." He rested one paternal hoof on the statue's back. "This is Henrietta, the very first cockatrice in Our Lady of Sunrise Hospital's emergency petrifaction program."

"Emergency petrifaction?" Flash said. He hastily clamped his mouth shut when Princess Twilight gave him a glare.

"I gave you a summary in the dossier for today's schedule," she said irritably. "Didn't you read it?"

"I, er, yes, your highness... that is I... skimmed it," he said, carefully keeping his face neutral. That was all the time I had for it and the other six OTHER dossiers you sent me today, he finished silently. He managed to keep from saying it out loud. But only barely.

Things had become a bit tense between the new princess and her Captain of the Guard. His loose management style was driving her up the wall. From his side, her demands for ever-increasing amounts of pre-planning, scheduling and listmaking was reaching a breaking point where he could either do his job, or spend his entire day documenting it. Both of them had resorted to rather childish extremes; him dashing off the most rudimentary paperwork he could get away with, her sending it
back to be redone in triplicate, him sticking it in his "in" box and "losing" or "forgetting" it...

Twilight groaned and rolled her eyes. "Hey, give him a break, Twilight," Spike said. "I was about to ask the same thing." Spike, as their go-between, was starting to get a little sick of it all. He'd taken to "accidentally" torching a lot of the scutwork when Twilight wasn't looking.

"Et Tu, Spike?" Twilight Sparkle said. She sighed. "Petrification means 'turn to stone.' The Lady of Sunrise Hospital uses petrification spells to, well, preserve badly injured or dangerously sick ponies until they can be gotten proper medical help. It's saved hundreds of lives."

"Thousands, I would say," Doctor Elixir said. "We began using the method over fifty years ago, once safe and reliable depetrification methods were perfected. Nowadays we have better alternatives, but back then we really didn't have enough unicorns on staff capable of a proper petrifying spell, so we kept a stable of hoof-raised cockatrices on grounds for the job. Henrietta here was the first. Seems one of the doctors on staff back then, Time Heals, had been doing research into petrification spells, and he was out in the field trying to catch some cockatrice hatchlings to bring back to the lab when one of his colleagues was badly injured in a rockslide. They would never get back to a hospital in time. Doctor Heals had a brainstorm. He got the hatchling they'd caught, made it stare into his injured partner's eyes, and--" the doctor shrugged. "They got him back to the hospital, depetrified him and patched him up. Since then it's been standard procedure for every emergency responder team to carry a cockatrice with them, for just that purpose."

"Cool," Spike said.

"This," Elixir said, gesturing grandly around him, "Is the Henrietta wing. It's a section of the hospital set aside for patients who are under long-term petrifaction."

"Those with... terminal illnesses," Twilight said.

"For the most part, yes. There are also a few volunteers---ponies who undergo petrifaction for research purposes, so we can study the effects of being turned to stone for prolonged periods of time." Elixir stepped to one of the doors lining the hall. "Here, let me show you..." He pushed the door open. On the other side was a dimly lit hospital room. Inside, on a flat bed of excelsior where a hospital bed would normally be, lay a stone statue of a unicorn pony, couchant. Her head was up and looking ahead, with a slightly apprehensive, yet determined look on her face, as if she had steeled herself to look at whatever had been before her sightless eyes... Twilight remembered red, glowing eyes and shuddered. A nurse was sitting beside the statue, reading aloud from a paperback novel. She looked up when Doctor Elixir opened the door but he silently signaled her to go about her business.

"They can hear?" Twilight asked. She recalled what a certain draconequus had told them after being depetrified.

"Some of them," the head doctor said. "Some can see, some can hear, some can't. It varies from pony to pony, much as it does for those in a coma. We make a point of treating all of them as if they can... read to them daily, newspapers, their favorite books, that sort of thing. One fellow came out after ten years speaking fluent Neighponese."

The nurse nodded, but still set the book down. "I think that's where we'll stop today, miss Daisy Chain," she said, moving about the statue. "We need to do your checkup now..." she proceeded to examine the petrified pony from end to end.

"What's she doing?" Spike said.
"Checking Miss Chain's condition," Elixir said. "Monitoring for any change in the petrification, as well as checking for chips, cracks, that sort of thing."

"ouch," Spike muttered.

"Oh, it's less serious than it sounds... depending on the type of petrification, in fact, cracking often is just a sign that the petrification is spontaneously reversing. When it isn't... well, we've actually brought back a pony who was shattered in half. Just magically glued the pieces back together and unpetrified him," Elixir said. "In those cases there are detrimental aftereffects. Scarring, nerve damage, phantom pains, separation trauma. So we naturally want to avoid anything like that as much as possible. Hence the bedding." He pointed at the bed of shavings the petrified pony sat in.

He picked up the clipboard at the end of the pony's 'bed' and looked it over. "Ah let's see. Miss Daisy Chain, age forty three, admitted for a congenital heart defect. She volunteered to undergo petrification until a donor heart became available for transplant." He smiled. "Well, we have some good news for her. We've just received word that her place on the waiting list is up; we'll be able to depetrify her and perform the heart transplant this week."

"Wonderful!" the nurse applauded. "You hear that, dear? You'll be up and around in no time." She patted the statue on the withers, smiling.

They proceeded on through the wing, looking in on various patients. Some were there, waiting for a transplant or a surgeon to arrive for an emergency operation; others, less happily, were terminally ill patients who had chosen to be petrified so they could wait for medicine to advance just a bit more towards a cure. There were more than a few volunteers, in fact; their stories were as varied as one could imagine. Some were merely making a few bits volunteering for short-term petrification for the researchers. Others were would-be chrononauts, choosing to take a one-way trip into the next century... most of those volunteers were put under sleeping pills before petrification, to assure they were actually unconscious and to spare them the boredom of waiting for a hundred years to pass. Some, quite bluntly stated, were seeking to cheat death--- suffering from advanced old age and in chronic illness and pain, they had chosen the cockatrice's gaze over the grave.

Those were the ones most deeply invested in the hospital's true research: Longevity.

Flash Sentry had blanched somewhat at that. It hadn't escaped Twilight's notice. She was still miffed at him and took a wee bit of spite in putting him on the spot. "And what are your thoughts on that, Captain?"

Flash blinked at the sudden question. "Me?"

"Yes, you. You seem put off by the notion..." she let a hint of challenge enter her voice. Well, she was a princess, darn it, shouldn't she be allowed to tweak ponies who annoyed her once in a while? "I'm guessing you think that ponies shouldn't fear death like this, something along those lines?"

"I-- no, actually. I'm a soldier, your Highness," Flash said. "Contrary to what most ponies think, our job is to make sure the other guy dies for his country. We're not in love with death." He bit his lip. "It's just that... well, that seems like a really lousy sort of immortality." He grimaced. "I'd think after a few years of not being able to move or breathe or even blink, most ponies would rather face the Hereafter than go on existing like that."

"That is why, once a year, we depetrify the long-timers for a day," the doctor said seriously. "We let them spend a day moving about, talking with us, get some sun and air... and decide if they want to go under again." He shrugged. "It's surprising the number of ponies who actually find the experience, well, restful. No aches and pains, no chronic discomforts, no tiredness--- plus, the
emotions are muted. No pulse to race in fear, you see. No hormones to surge in the veins with grief, or rage, or sorrow... even those that are conscious and aware describe it as incredibly quiescent." He sighed. "Still, for some, the experience eventually becomes... unpleasant enough that they choose to stay depetrified and let nature take its course. We try to comfort ourselves by reminding one another that they go on to a better place..."

Spike looked cynical. "But, if that's the case, what's the point of all this?"

"How do you mean?"

"I mean, there's an Afterlife. So if they're 'going on to a better place,' why treat them? Heck, why treat anypony at all?" Spike said. "Why not just let ponies die so they can just get to the Summerlands or the Great Eternal Plains or whatever that much faster?"

"Spike!" Twilight said, chagrined.

"Well?" Spike challenged.

Twilight cringed. Sometimes it was easy to forget that Spike was still very young... and could be very blunt. But this was something that she really should have talked about with him sooner... She sat down and put her hoof on his shoulder. "Because every day of this life is precious, Spike," she said. "Some day, past the end of time, they say that this life and the next life will be the same. But for now, we only go through this life one time, and every single extra day we can buy for a pony is priceless."

Spike looked doubtful. "But..."

"It's boot camp, Spike," Flash Sentry interrupted. They both looked at him, puzzled. He flushed, but pressed on. "Before a Guard goes on to, well, the real work of being a Guard, he has to go through boot camp--- just twelve weeks, that's all." He scraped a forehoof on the floor. "Life's like boot camp-- you only go through once. But that's all the training you get for what comes next... so you want every last day of it there is."

"That's... a pretty good analogy," Twilight admitted. She smiled at Flash, seeming to forget for a moment that she was supposed to be mad at him. "What he said, Spike. The Hereafter may be forever, but it's what we do in this life--- the things we do, the lessons we learn, the ones we love---- that will make us who we are, and that will prepare us for who we're going to be when we get there. And every day we have gives us a chance to add more to that... richness."

Comprehension seemed to dawn on Spike's face a little. His mouth quirked. "Heap up at the buffet line, 'cause you only go through once, right?"

Twilight giggled. "That's a pretty good analogy too," she admitted. "All we're trying to do is make the buffet line as long as possible."

Doctor Elixir stroked his chin. "I'll have to remember that one," he admitted. "It'll go a long way explaining our goals at the next board meeting with the investors."

"Well you are sort of almost there," Spike said. "Your patients would kind of be immortal-- except for that whole made of stone, never moving again thing." His voice was wry. "If they could turn to stone and still move around, you might be on to something."

"Actually, there are a few researchers who are exploring that avenue," Elixir said. "Some rather radical concepts in that area, I must say. Seeing as many of the petrifaction patients are conscious, one of our physicians has been speculating on the concept of transforming the pony into a sort of
golem... he reasons that if we could establish some way for the petrified pony to communicate with the outside world, the next step would be to... well, shrink them down," he gestured with his hooves, indicating something about the size of a desk knick-knack, "and insert them into an artificial or mechanical body...."

"Cool, like Atomo the Living Brain! Only... er, more like Atomo the living stone-statue-inna-robot..." Spike paused. "Maybe you could just petrify their brains?"

Twilight rolled her eyes. Spike and his comic books, she thought, before turning her attention back to the task at hand. From the moment she had heard about the research at Our Lady of Sunrise, she had been both eager to see their work, and optimistic that she might find traces of alicorn involvement somewhere in the facilities. She reasoned that if anypony had a motivation into researching longevity, it would be a lonely alicorn who sought to end their solitude, much as Celestia did. And perhaps the researchers might have tumbled to something in the past century on solving the riddle of alicorn ascension. She had kept the alicorn-detection spell humming (disguising the horn-glow by keeping her day planner and quill hovering nearby) and kept her metaphorical fingers crossed.(1)

It hadn't panned out quite so well, though. The work they were doing here was incredible, and was advancing medical techniques by leaps and bounds. Twilight made a note to make sure that the hospital received a generous royal grant. But most of their work, while promising, ranged far afield and didn't seem to be unearthing anything particularly revolutionary in the alicorn-related areas. And she hadn't picked up a single trace of alicorn anywhere, other than herself.

The rest of the tour of their research department was rather fascinating, all the same. The research of longevity had a surprising number of avenues of pursuit. She had, of course, volunteered to donate a pint of blood for their research, along with a wing feather, some horn slivers, and a lock of her mane and tail. These were all eagerly and gratefully accepted; she was informed that Celestia and Luna both stopped by once a year for that same purpose. To her surprise though they asked for a blood and scale sample from Spike as well. "Dragons are, of course, immensely long-lived," Elixir explained. "But of course getting samples to study is, aheh, a tad difficult."

"Hey, no problem, doc," Spike said. "Say, would you like some of Peewee's feathers? He's a baby Phoenix after all--"

Elixir most certainly would, and was ecstatic to receive them. "Phoenix regeneration research has had some promising, if unusual results," he said. "One doctor made an elixir from phoenix feathers once, cleared up his unicorn patient's chronic digestive troubles, his eczema, cataracts, and his halitosis but--" he hesitated. "Well, we have him under long-term observation now because of the side effects."

"What side effects does he have?" Spike asked.

"He tends to burst into flame at random intervals," Elixir said awkwardly.

There was a loud FWOOMP from further back in the building. Orange light flickered in one doorway. "Nurse! It's happening again!" somepony yelled frantically over the sound of a beeping smoke alarm. A moment later a bored-looking nurse trotted past with a fire extinguisher in her magical grip. There was a prolonged fwoooooooosh. Steam rolled out into the hall. "Sorry," the pony's voice said weakly.

"It's okay, hon, these things just happen. Lemme fetch you a new hospital gown," the nurse said.

Elixir looked apologetic. "We usually have him in a room with a sprinkler system, but they've been doing repairs..."
Research into age spells was proving disappointing. They either tended to wear off, instantly returning the subject to their true age, or the subject simply aged faster with each application... and the first time was measured in mere months. "Sometimes though they're still applicable for medical purposes," Elixir explained as they passed the laboratory where they were aging and de-aging lab mice. "A young colt can often recuperate better from an illness or injury than an old stallion, even if they're an old stallion by the end of the year. The trick is to adapt the bandages and sutures for a rapidly growing body...."

In the next lab over they were turning lab mice into frogs, and back again. "This shows promise," Elixir said. "We already can make a patient regenerate lost limbs. We're just trying to find a way to do it without having to turn them into frogs first."

The work was obviously not without problems. The phoenix-flammable pony was just one example; research into transferring the lifespan of the sequoia in a clinical trial had resulted in several disgruntled ponies with twigs and leaves where their manes should be, and there was another who had come out of the laboratory unchanged by essence of gallop-agos tortoise save that he moved painfully, painfully slow.

They took time to pass through the regular departments of the hospital, visiting the patients and using Twilight's princessly presence to boost the patients' good cheer. The trip through the children's wing was an irrepressible mood lifter; It was a tossup whether Twilight in her royal finery or Flash and his guards in their polished armor gave the foals there the biggest thrill.

By the end of it they had toured every wing and floor. And not a trace of alicorn or alicorn magic anywhere. Twilight sighed and let the spell wink out. She turned to bid their leave from Doctor Elixir. "Thank you for your tour, Doctor," she said. "We will put in word with the other Princesses to renew your grants, with a recommendation to expand. I hate to cut this short but we do have a schedule to keep--"

Flash Sentry came trotting up. "Um, we might have a bit more time," Flash said. "Sorry, your Highness, my fault but we'll have to delay our departure for a little bit longer--"

"Delay?" Twilight said. Her irritation from earlier returned almost immediately. She started to snap something when she noticed that Flash was sporting a cotton bandage on his foreleg he hadn't had before. "Wait, what happened, what's this?" she poked at the bandage with a hoof. She suddenly realized that there were more of her guards in the hallway than had been there before... a lot more. In fact the entire waiting area was filled with armored soldiers patiently sitting. "What is this?"

Flash looked embarrassed and flexed his foreleg. "While they were drawing your blood sample, I asked....seems they're running short of pints of the regular stuff as well. So I had a word with the boys, and we decided to top 'em off." He looked over his shoulder at the others. "That right, fellas?"

"Darn straight, sir!" one of them said. The guards lining the halls saluted.

Flash grinned. "Good men."

"Man, I hate needles," one grumbled.

"Awww, c'mon," his seat mate told him. "If you're a big brave soldier you'll get an orange and a cookie!" laughter rippled up the aisle.

"We should all be tapped and ready to re-board in..." Flash looked at the nurse handling the paperwork inquisitively.
"Oh, about an hour, hour and a half," she said.

"What she said." He cleared his throat. "The whole Guard volunteered. Ship’s crew, too. Got a lot more volunteers than I expected. Sorry."

Twilight puffed out her cheeks and blew her forelock into the air. She could hardly be mad at him for this, but darn it-- "What brought this on?" she said.

He sobered a bit. "When your Highness decided to make a blood donation, I thought it would be a good example to follow," he said. "They got a lot of sick ponies here. A lot of sick foals, especially. If our princess can open a vein for her ponies, can her guards do any less?"

Twilight gave up. "Okay, good show, then," she said. "Go-- do a head count, or something." Flash nodded, gave her a half smile and strode off down the hallway, shouting out for a roll call. Twilight rolled her eyes. There went the entire rest of the day's itinerary. Of all the un-planned, impulsive....

... exasperating symbolic noble gestures...

Why did she suddenly want to smile? Darn him anyway!

1)Half the sapient races on Equestria had fingers. She knew what they were and why they would be crossed.
Sunset Shimmer caught the high winds, soaring skyward as she flew over the Foal Mountains. She tossed her mane in the icy air, euphoric. Flying, actually flying! With wings! Her own wings, not some magical constructs either. She didn't think she'd ever get over the thrill.

It had been a busy time since her reconciliation, and her ascension. There had been more than a few fences to mend, and the ones with Celestia were only the first. Her first order of business had been to return to the Human world on the other side of the magic mirror, and try to undo the harm she'd caused. That had been... awkward. In the other world she'd been a high school student--- one with a grown mare's cunning and experience, and a ruthless streak a mile wide. She had tied the student body in knots, exercising a campaign of divide and conquer: wrapping several popular boys around her finger before discarding them, ingratiating herself to the school authority figures, setting her most likely female rivals--- the counterparts of the Element Bearers no less; what were the odds?--- at one another's throats with bits of gossip and carefully targeted emails, making the social rejects and outcasts like Snips and Snails and Button Mash into her personal flunkies... She'd had a lot to make amends for.

It had taken several days of apologies and painful confrontations, and at least one catfight... but in the end after all the tears, it had been worth it. She had returned to Equestria with her load greatly lightened.

She shook her head as she reflected on it. What in Equestria had she been thinking? That she was going to conquer the world by becoming prom queen? Sure, she would have had the Element of Magic. She'd learned of the existence of the Elements long before leaving Equestria, and she'd used advanced arithmancy to figure out that the Elements-- even the Element of Magic--- could be used independently. (and hadn't that been some clever magic work.... ) and , while trapped in the Human world, sensed its presence through the Mirror... She'd known that with its power she'd have increased her magic tenfold or more, and become obsessed with obtaining it.

She snorted. Celestia was right; she was an idiot when it came to planning out the next step. As if Celestia (or Luna, she reminded herself) would have just rolled over for a tiara-wearing alicorn wannabee and an army of high schoolers. There were more soldiers guarding the royal wine cellars than Sunset Shimmer would have had in her entire teenybopper army. Shoot, Celestia and Luna barely ranked a distant third in raw power in Equestria, maybe even lower if you took into account some of the entities imprisoned in Tartarus. At the very least it would have been Sunset Shimmer versus the other five Element Bearers-- and after what happened to Luna nee Nightmare Moon, it wasn't hard to guess which way that would have gone.

And as for conquest in the human world...? Sunset Shimmer shuddered. She hadn't slept through all of her classes in that dismal human high school. She'd learned enough human history to know just how bad an idea attempted conquest was. She would have stood a snowball's chance in hell of taking over that world, even with the Element's power. Humans were helpless-looking things with no magic, with no fangs or talons, no scales or fiery breath, no monstrous strength, no hooves, horns, or wings, nothing but soft helpless monkey things. Soft helpless monkey things who leveled their own cities with a push of a button when they got angry enough. She was sure they would have had a colorful and historically memorable name for the crater left behind, had she tried to march up and claim a throne anywhere in their world.

Maybe it was the hormones. Being trapped in a pseudo-adolescent body had probably made her "go
native" for a while, start actually thinking like a short-sighted little dimwitted teenage girl. She'd probably been within a few months of spending all her free time at the mall and making duckfaces at her iPhone. She shuddered again.

It was at that moment that the alicorn-seeking spell lying dormant at the base of her horn blared like a klaxon. "WAUGH!" she yelped, her eyes crossing as she tumbled through the air. It took her several seconds to reorient herself; the moment she did she landed on a cloud and whipped out her compact. "Celestia!" she said into the tiny magic mirror. "Celestia, Luna-- oh shoot, what's the thingy for--- oh right, Conference Call!"

A moment later the tiny mirror was crowded with ghostly, overlapping faces, and a tumult of voices rose from the glass. "Everypony, everypony," Sunset said. The queries died down. "This is Sunset Shimmer. I just got a hit!"

Another tumult started-- surprise, elation and more. This time it was Celestia who managed to be heard over the clamor. "Wonderful!" The sun princess said. "Where were you when it happened?"

"Over the Foal Mountains," Sunset said. She turned her head as she talked, trying to sense if the 'tone' of the spell waxed or waned. "Did any of you sense anything? I was hoping if you did I could triangulate with you..."

Everypony on the conference call shook their heads. "I'm afraid not, Sunset," Twilight said. "The spell is too short range for that."

"Right, right," Sunset said, annoyed. She'd forgotten that little drawback of the alicorn detection spell. The spell was, depending on the user, only good for a few hundred feet to a few miles. The only reason Celestia had been able to detect the ascension of the Bearers all the way to Canterlot was because it was six alicorns ascending simultaneously, with a massive magical boost from the Elements to boot.

"Was it an ascension?" Twilight asked, curious.

"I dunno, it was certainly loud and sudden enough," Sunset said, rubbing her head. "You really need to tone down the resonances in the matrix on this spell, Twilight; It felt like someone used my horn for an air horn nozzle." Twilight winced and giggled awkwardly. "Wait..." Sunny blinked. The tone was gone. "It's gone!"

"What?"

"It... it just shut off! Like someone turning off a light switch!" Sunset turned around on her cloud, baffled.

"That's... baffling," Twilight said.

"Do you think they saw you coming and decided to hide?" Pinkie Pie said.

"Tis a possibility," Luna said. "Little Princess Necturus wast hidden from us as well, after all, and by naught but instinct. A more puissant and skilled alicorn might hide more effectively.... save for a brief gaffe or slip..."

"I'm going to investigate," Sunset said decisively. She shut the compact with a snap and dove off the cloud, sweeping down low over the treetops in a widening spiral, horn gleaming....

...nothing. She swept an area nearly a mile in diameter, and didn't pick up so much as a peep. Vexed, she dove below the canopy; under the trees she found a wagon trail. She followed it to where it split
off into three different directions. No sign of anypony, not even wagon tracks. Sunset stamped in frustration. She'd been told that an alicorn's magic would instinctively hide their trail if they didn't wish to be found, but it was another thing to witness it. This trail looked like it hadn't been passed in months.

She back-tracked, and found, at long last, signs of ponies; there was a small campsite by the road, abandoned (she estimated) about the time she'd been knocked for a loop by the alicorn detection spell, at this point over an hour ago. Whoever had been here had apparently tried to wipe away any traces of the camp before beating a hasty retreat. She nosed around, hoping to find some indication of which direction they went... the only thing she uncovered were the remains of a runic circle scratched out in the dirt. The physical scratches had been hastily scuffed over but with her alicorn eyes she could still see the quintessence lines glimmering faintly in the dirt. She pulled out her compact again. "I think I found something," she said. "Somepony was trying a rather complex spell..."

"What sort?" Twilight asked.

"Something complicated enough to need a binding circle," Sunset said. "It's hard to tell, but it looks like..." she squinted at the rapidly fading remains of the runes. "Like a transmogrification reversal?" Reversal spells--- or "Un-dos" as most unicorns called them-- were part of the standard curriculum for unicorns. They were actually fairly simple and most unicorns knew two or three one-size-fits-all variants. It was very unusual to see one this involved and complex. Rarer still to find one, to judge by the burnt look of the end-loop runes, that had failed...

"Any sign of which way they went?" Twilight interrupted Sunset's thoughts. "It sounds like they might have botched a spell and need help undoing it."

"We can send help--" Celestia said.

"No no, that's no good," Sunset said. "They'll see guardsmen hunting for them and they'll panic, disappear for good." She chewed her lip. "Darn it. It's getting late-- I'm coming back to the castle, I'll re-start the search in the morning when I think up a plan."

It was two days later, but it was a really good plan. At least Sunset thought so. Alicorn magic or no, tracking an alicorn that didn't want to be found required something better than powerful spells; it required some really lateral thinking. The alicorn self-hiding aura was... rather capricious. Each alicorn's hiding aura was unique; it could operate in rather peculiar ways, and fail in myriad ways, too. It almost seemed to be a sort of karmic backlash. In Celestia and Luna's case, their aura had kept them hidden and safe during Discord's reign, and had worked perfectly, right up to the point they had confronted him... then it had blown out spectacularly. For centuries afterward it had been effectively impossible to hide from their little ponies, almost as if the spell was compensating for centuries of concealing them from the world. It had taken ages for them to devise workarounds, such as the notice-me-not spell, that would give them a moment's privacy again.

In other cases, the aura could... pop up in odd quirks. Twilight Sparkle had been initially very uncomfortable with the attention she got from other ponies as a Princess. Not enough to drive her into Reclusion (her own term for the Alicorn-in-Hiding scenario), but enough that the common pony would often spontaneously fail to notice that they were dealing with an alicorn princess-- generally at inconvenient or embarrassing times. It's not normal for an alicorn princess to hail a cab only to be flipped the bird and driven past, after all. After the third pony pushed ahead of her in line at the grocery store, she got over it and started wearing her royal finery in public deliberately.
Sunset's reasoning was this: Whoever this alicorn was, they were pushing their find-me-not field as hard as they could. Unconsciously, most likely, but still. The aura would erase footprints, hide trails, blur memories, misdirect attention. There was bound to be a backlash effect. Or, more likely, the effect would come full circle: they were pushing it so far in one direction that it was bound to come all the way around from the other side, to the point that they left behind a sort of hole where they should have been, becoming noticeable by their very absence.

So, Sunset reasoned, the answer was simple. She returned to the abandoned campsite two days later: enough time to let the elusive alicorn believe they were no longer pursued. Then she carefully covered her wings with a pair of oversized panniers, and set out down the road on hoof... and every time the road forked, she took the road that looked less traveled by. She knew she was on the right trail when she passed through a little whistle stop (three houses, a dry goods store and a rain barrel) and not only could the old coot in a rocker on the dry goods front porch not remember anypony passing by, but the main route out of town had no wheel ruts. At all.

It was five miles after that when Sunset Shimmer finally caught up to her quarry. In fact, she nearly passed them right by. It was only a hundred feet down the road that she realized the totally unobtrusive, surely long abandoned gypsy caravan wagon by the roadside had a campfire smoldering beside it. She backtracked, deliberately not taking her eyes off the wagon as she cast every illusion dispelling charm she knew. Sakes, but the alicorn aura was just the first part; there were half a dozen illusions, misdirections and no-see-ums layered on top.

She was barely ten yards away before she even "noticed" the colt sitting by the campfire, tending the stew pot. The illusion was impressive; one moment he wasn't there, then he seemed to fade in out of the forest background, like an image in one of those paintings that changed depending on where you stood. If Sunset Shimmer had been surprised, the poor colt looked absolutely panicked. He'd frozen, stew ladle in hoof, his eyes fixed on hers as she approached. He was a lanky thing, just barely older than the Cutie Mark Crusaders by Sunset's estimation, with a reddish brown coat and a tousled purple mane that poked out from under the hood of his traveling cloak. He stared at her with wide golden eyes. "Hello," Sunset said cautiously. "I am Sunset Shimmer. I'm... looking for somepony...?"

"What??" a feminine voice inside shrilled. The door slammed shut, and Sunset Shimmer heard the sound of bolts being drawn. Well, that wasn't good. She sighed and facehoofed. The Princesses (and Prince) really needed to sit down and work out some sort of protocol for approaching hiding, paranoid alicorns. In fact Prince Shining Armor was probably a good pony to talk to; he was military, wasn't he? He probably had a few ideas.

She crept closer, ears pricked. As she circled the wagon the multi-layered illusion fell away. It was rather clever, she had to admit: simple camouflage, underneath two or three types of optical illusion-- she blinked, dispelling the odd blind spots that were floating over her eyes-- and add to that a spell that induced entoptic effects for good measure. Mix in a notice-me-not spell to direct her attention elsewhere, and throw the blanket alicorn aura over top of it... sakes alive this alicorn was paranoid.

Of course, the drawback to using such stealth and illusion spells is that, once you recognized them for what they were, they almost instantly stopped working on you. And the more effects you added on, the faster it fell apart. Once Sunset had squinted her way past the camouflage illusion, the rest of it had come apart like a house of cards. Of course it helped that Sunset knew she was looking for something, and she was very persistent....
If there had been any doubt she was on the right track, it faded the moment she stepped to the front door. The alicorn detection spell was going off again, a choral drone that throbbed in time with her pulse.

She got to the door of the gaily colored wagon as the last of the illusions around it unraveled. There was a bit of ruckus going on inside, a lot of things banging around and frantic whispers. Sunset cocked an ear and leaned in, listening.

"I thought you said nopony would look twice at us!"

"Nopony should even look twice at us! Trixie used her finest illusions! It was a masterpiece of thaumaturgical stealth!"

"Well she's looking, and a lot more than twice! She's right outside! She said she's looking for somepony, too."

"What did she look like?"

"Unicorn, yellow with red hair. High class looks. Canterlot accent."

"Looked a bit out of place did she?"

"Like a peacock in a chicken farm."

_Hmph_, Sunset thought, miffed. _I thought I'd gotten more in touch with the common pony. I guess you can take the filly out of Canterlot..._

The female said a few uncouth words. "That wretched Brass must have gone to the Capital and tipped off more of his rotten 'friends.' If she's not from the government I'll eat my hat!"

"What do we do?" The colt sounded more and more upset. "I-- I don't wanna go back--"

_Curiouser and curiouser_, Sunset thought. She decided to take the minotaur by the horns and rapped firmly on the door. "Hello in there?" she said. "I mean no harm. Please, may I speak to you?"

There was a brief clatter, followed by the sound of a bolt sliding back. "Er, come in dearie, the door's open," the mare said-- in a high, reedy, elderly voice.

Sunset pushed the door open and stepped inside. The interior was quite nice; well furnished, if rather cozy. Two bunks, a couple of stools, a small stove for heat, a pair of steamer trunks for private possessions. Every spare inch of the caravan was accounted for; packed with home comforts and bric-a-brac of all variety. A lot of it, Sunset noted, seemed to be the sort of things one used for stagecraft or street performance.

The colt was in the back of the caravan, mucking about with a few stack of books and trying desperately to not look scared out of his wits. In the middle of the room, fuddling about with something on the floor, was a mare in an enormous baggy dress and a voluminous shawl that nearly buried her from sight. She was stooped down, wiping away at some stray chalk marks... "Hello, dearie," she croaked, her voice coming out of the depths of her shawl. "How can an old granny and her son help out a fellow traveler?"

Sunset Shimmer rolled her eyes. The performance was passable, but this close she could clearly see the mare's muscle tone under her cloak was too good and her chalk hoof too steady and smooth. "You know, if you're trying to hide who you are, it's not particularly clever to leave magic inscriptions anywhere somepony can see them."
The mare froze. "I don't know what you're talking about, dearie," she said, frantically scrubbing. "This is just a-- a good luck charm, for travelers---"

"I can see the runes from here, Trixie," Sunset said, amused.

Trixie stopped writing and dropped the chalk. "Fine," she said, her voice clear, and stood up. She shucked off the shawl and the bag dress, revealing a blue unicorn mare with a pale mane wearing a star spangled cape. "So one of Sheriff Brass' buffoons tracked us down," she snapped, whipping a star spangled hat off a nearby peg and jamming it down on her head. "Well you can tell Brass that the Great and Powerful Trixie doesn't give up without a fight!" She whipped something out of her cape and flung it to the floorboards at Sunset's feet.

Clouds of smoke filled the tiny wagon, blinding Sunset. "Run, Jasper!" she heard Trixie yell. There was a sound of scurrying hooves, followed by a loud double thump and groans of pain. Sunset waved her horn, sending the purple smoke swirling up the stove chimney and revealing Trixie and Jasper piled up against the back of the wagon, moaning.

"By the way, I blocked the back door from the outside," Sunset said. "So could we please stop with this now and--"

"Never!" Trixie got up and stood on wobbly hooves, horn flaring. "Let us go or face my magical wrath!" The fact that she was trying to uncross her eyes from whacking headlong into her back door made the threat a great deal less intimidating.

Sunset decided she'd had enough. "Oh really?" she said, annoyed. She shrugged off her panniers and flared her wings. For an added flourish she pulled her tiara (custom made by the royal jeweler) and plunked it on her head. "If you think you got a shot, feel free to take it."

Trixie and Jasper gaped at her wings, then her horn, then her tiara in horror. "She's a princess," Jasper squeaked. "Oh we are so boned."

They held that tableau for a heartbeat. "Very well," Trixie said, grimly. "You leave me no choice."

With that she flung herself at Sunset Shimmer's hooves, wrapping her forelegs around Sunset's ankle and began howling like a distraught diamond dog. "Oh please have mercy your great and anonymous highness we swear to you it was unintentional Trixie pleads for mercy or at least for you to not send the colt to the moon he's only a child and---"

"AUGH! WHAT WHAT what WHAT??" Sunset tried to yank her hoof away, to no avail. Trixie clung like a limpet, blubbering for mercy. Jasper had fallen to the floor as well, kowtowing in terror.

"What are you talking about? Get to your hooves, you two!" Slowly, reluctantly, the two got up in a cringing crouch. "What the heck is this all about?"

Jasper huddled next to Trixie. "We know you're all hunting for us because of Sheriff Brass," he said. His lower lip trembled and his golden eyes turned wet. "And after what happened last month he's got us dead to rights... we never meant to commit treason, we swear--"

"Treason??" Sunset shimmer gawped. The more they talked, the more baffled she got.

"For... for impersonating royalty," Jasper said.

At Sunset's increasingly baffled expression, Jasper got to his feet. Trixie followed. Silently they shucked their cloaks.

And slowly spread their wings.
Sunset, of course, had promptly scanned them both. Status confirmed. Congratulations, everypony, it's alicorns. One mare, one colt. After a lot of talking, and a LOT of repeated promises that no, she wasn't there to arrest them or send them to the moon or turn them into statues (where DID these horrific rumors get started? Discord and Nightmare Moon were god-tier menaces; why would Celestia ever resort to such things otherwise? Ponies really didn't know Celestia like they thought they did), she got them to start talking.

It was one hell of a story.

Some short while after a rather embarrassing run in with Twilight Sparkle involving a magic duel and a cursed artifact known as the Alicorn Amulet, The Great and Powerful Trixie, showmare extraordinaire, had gone back on the road-- as far as she could get from Ponyville--- trying to rebuild her reputation and career as a traveling performer. In the course of touring the hinterlands she had apparently run afoul of an earth pony village named Promise, which was basically run by the Filii Terram, a group of earth pony supremacists and pure-blood bigots. It seems an orphan had gone missing in their town, and nopony gave a rat's behind... but another foal belonging to a pegasus mailmare passing through had gone missing as well and Sheriff Brass had to put in a pretense of looking. So he'd basically blackmailed Trixie into doing his dirty work for him. After considerable risk and danger, Trixie and the traveling mailmare had found the missing foals in a dangerous wood known as Dusky Dale and rescued them... at which point Trixie had found out that both the missing foals were unicorns.

"Those miserable turf-herders were willing to let two foals die in a forest full of timberwolves for the "sin" of being crossbreeds," Trixie snorted. She ladled some of the potato soup from the kettle and passed it to Jasper. "Care for some?" Sunset nodded, and received a bowl. "Naturally, Trixie returned to town, and made a point of letting the entire sorry town know precisely what had happened, and precisely she thought of them-- and that she was taking Jasper with her, whether they liked it or not." She smiled briefly at the colt. "We have been... family... ever since."

Jasper smiled. He turned out to be a handsome colt under that baggy cloak, with a cutie mark of a purple and red gemstone crossed with a bolt of flame. "Best day of my life," he said softly. His smile turned into a frown. "Too bad Brass-ass didn't like it that way---"

"Jasper! Language." Trixie smirked. "He's SHERIFF Brass-ass, young colt, remember that." Jasper snickered. "Alas, tis true," Trixie continued. "The snivelling bully finally decided his bloated ego was stronger than his cowardice, and set out to pursue us. Probably afraid somepony important will find out what an incompetent boob he is."

"Cowardice?" Sunset asked, sipping her soup.

Trixie looked embarrassed. "In her righteous anger Trixie may have... implied... that she had the power to erase Promise from the map for their wickedness, if she so wished. Ahem." She shuffled. "Trixie hoped to keep them from trying to cause trouble for us. It seems to have backfired rather dramatically."

Sunset shook her head. "Coulda seen that coming," she said.

"Sheriff Brass has been hounding us ever since," Jasper said. His expression could have curdled the soup in his bowl. "He's got himself a whole network of good ol' stallions, other Sheriffs, members of the Filii Terram... he's been sending out letters ahead of us telling the law in every two bit town that we're fugitives, or thieves, or bunko artists or worse. Claiming Trixie's a kidnapper-- telling them to
"I don't know what the dullard expects to do once he has us," Trixie said. "He's a two-bit sheriff from a one-bit town run by him, the mayor and the deputy, and one testicle between the three of them." Sunset nearly snorted her soup out her nose. "But I don't intend to find out. With our luck he has a good ol' stallion friend who can get us dumped in an oubliette someplace and nopony the wiser."

"Thus far we've stayed a couple of hoofsteps ahead of him," Trixie said. "We spent most of last year outside of Equestria, touring the gryphon and minotaur lands. And I thought pony hecklers were tough." Jasper giggled. "I'd hoped the heat would be off by now, but--" she shrugged. "Brass is stubborn.

"Then last week--" Her wings rustled under her spangled cape. She looked back at them with tooth-grinding anger. "Then last week I really screwed things up for both of us." She waved a wing. "With this!"

"I don't understand?" Sunset said.

Trixie sighed. "Ever since Trixie's little... um... incident with the Alicorn Amulet, she's noticed her magic being a bit sub-par," she said. "Hiccuping a bit. So she's been studying, trying to, well, spruce up around the edges a bit." She sniffed loftily. "About a week ago, in a town just outside Hollow Shades, She got... overconfident and decided to spruce up our usual performance with some minor transmogrification. The spell was supposed to give Jasper and Trixie butterfly wings, but..." she cringed. "It... I don't know. I had a spell surge-- the first I've had since I was four years old!-- and the spell ran away with me..."

"I tried to use the spell-stopper Trixie taught me," Jasper threw in. "But the spell just started arcing back and forth between our horns. We're hanging in the air, light spiraling around us, sparks and explosions everywhere..." he grinned. "It was kind of cool, actually. Too bad we couldn't do a light show like that on our regular performance..."

"And when the spell completed with an almighty BANG, and the stars finally cleared from Trixie's eyes---" Trixie threw out her forehooves dramatically. "There we were. With these." She raised her wings from under her cape and fluttered them. She sighed wistfully. "Jasper's right, it did get a good bit of applause... then," she grimaced, "who should come striding up through the cheering crowd but Sheriff Brass, his dipstick deputy in tow, bellowing about how he had caught us in a further act of criminal malfeasance, and he was going to arrest us for defaming and impersonating royalty."

"Trixie looked horrified at the very thought. She held her hoof to her head. "If Jasper hadn't been as quick-thinking as he was, we would have been in hoofcuffs on the spot."

Jasper ducked his head and blushed, grinning. "I, uh, set off our fireworks display. All of 'em at once."

"Remember the first rule of performance, Jasper," Trixie chided, "Never undersell yourself. His special talent is fire magic," Trixie tipped her hoof at Jasper's cutie mark. "His magic boosted the firework display tenfold with a wave of his horn. In the ensuing confusion, we made our escape with a hasty come-to-life spell on our wagon. It was twenty miles before we could get the dratted thing to stop.

"But Brass cut us off again. He's hit the grapevine again, telling everypony about a pair of 'criminal con ponies' who are roaming the countryside, swindling people by 'impersonating royalty' and who are clearly up to no good... he's got every lawpony from here to Promise hunting for us...." she fanned her wings again, distressed. "We've been on the lam ever since. I've had to keep us behind so
many hiding spells that one morning I spent all day trying to find my own hooves!

"And I can't dispel this stupid transmogrification!" She clutched her hat to her chest and began chewing on the brim. "I've tried every detransmogrification, spell-interrupt and reversal I know, I've dug through every book I can lay hoof on, nothing works..." she grabbed Sunset's arm. "You have to believe us, your Highness. We would never insult the princesses by impersonating them---!"

Sunset Shimmer couldn't help it. She started to laugh. Trixie's baffled expression only made her laugh harder.

After a minute she finally caught her breath. "Well, first off, the reason the detransmogrification didn't work is because neither of you is under a transmogrifying spell," she said. Oh Maker, she thought gleefully as she watched their eyes go round, those looks of dawning wonder. "And as to impersonating royalty..."

Sheriff Brass sidled his way through the throng, Deputy Piccolo close behind him. "This is it, boy," he said with smug satisfaction, using his weight to shoulder past the mob of prissy Canterlot unicorns. "That no-account mare finally slipped up."

"How so, Sheriff?" Piccolo said, his voice cracking. He hustled to stay in Brass' wake, flashing his badge at the ponies glaring at him and the Sheriff.

Brass rolled his eyes. "'Cause she blew her cover, dimwit," he said. "A 'grand performance,' right here in the middle of Canterlot. All I can figger is she thought she was safe from us right here in yew-ni-corn central." He hawked and spat, barely missing a fancy-dressed mare's hoof. He ignored her yelp of outrage and kept edging forward through the crowd. "Spotlight-crazy dimwit musta forgot we're stallions o' the law. This badge don't stop at the edge o' Promise, no sir."

"No sir," Deputy Piccolo agreed.

"Now you're here, I'm here, and so's every pony I deputized," Brass went on. He looked around and was mighty proud to see earth ponies with badges and hats edging through the crowd towards the stage. It went without saying they were all members of the Filii Terram. "Fool nag set up this little show right in the middle of Canterlot Park. We got her surrounded, and soon we'll have her in cuffs. That nag will be wearin' stripes and bustin' rocks till cows have the vote."

"What about the colt?" his deputy asked.

"Meh; let th' guard dump him in some orphanage here," Brass said. "Better'n he deserves. Ah, here we are, front row--- Mayor Granite? What're you doin' here?" To his astonishment, the belligerent sheriff found himself elbow-to-elbow with the Mayor of Promise and the head of their local branch of the Order.

Mayor Granite looked at him in surprise. "Me? I received a royal invitation to Canterlot. What are YOU doing here, Sheriff?"

"Royal invite?" Brass was a bigoted dullard, but something about that phrase made the rusted gears in his mind turn in directions he didn't find happy. But before he could figure out why, his attention was yanked back to the wooden stage at the center of the park.

"FILLIES AND GENTLECOLTS OF CANTERLOT!!" a mare's magically amplified voice boomed out. "WELCOME ONE AND ALL TO THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY SHOW
HAPPENING IN ALL OF EQUESTRIA!" Fireworks shot off in every direction.

Brass snorted and rolled his eyes. It was the loudmouth showmare all right.

"WE PRESENT TO YOU A ROYAL COMMAND PERFORMANCE--"

Royal Command? Something funny was going on here...

"--THE GRAND EQUESTRIAN PREMIERE...FOR THE FIRST TIME ANYWHERE.... " In a flurry of fireworks and showers of fire fountains, the wooden stage unfolded like an origami swan. Standing in the middle were Trixie and Jasper.

"THE GREAT AND POWERFUL...." The showmare was wearing a brand new spangled robe and hat. She whipped them aside to reveal her blazing horn and fanning wings. She was resplendent in a translucent, star spangled cape, a tiara on her silky hair and glitter flashing on her wings.

"PRINCESS TRIXIE LULAMOON, ALICORN OF ILLUSION!" Starbursts and splashes of rainbow light fountained from her horn, out-dazzling the fireworks of just a moment before.

Sheriff Brass' jaw dropped. The sheer audacity of it.... "She's gonna be buried UNDER her jail cell," he said, almost too astonished to be outraged.

"ALSO FOR THE FIRST TIME ANYWHERE..." Trixie made a gesture to her sidekick. The colt kicked aside his robes. He spread his wings; they'd been lightly airbrushed to suggest flames at the edge of the feathers. His purple mane was sleeked back from his horn in a proud pompadour, revealing a small gold coronet. He reared up, letting his dark purple cape flutter to best effect.

"PRINCE JASPER LULAMOON, ALICORN OF FLAME!!" Jasper tossed his head; a half-dozen birds of multicolored flames spouted from his horn and spiraled around him, showering sparks. Several fillies in the front row squealed and swooned.

If Sheriff Brass had been slackjawed before, now he was practically purple with rage. "That's it," he bellowed, waving his hoof to give the signal. All around the stage, deputies began moving in---

And were pinned in place by blinding white spotlights. "BUT BEFORE WE GET OUR SHOW UNDERWAY," Trixie went on. "LET ME TAKE A MOMENT TO RECOGNIZE SOME SPECIAL GUESTS IN OUR AUDIENCE!"

"Allow me to introduce Brass, of Promise Town," she said. "Sheriff, prominent member of the Filii Terram--" Brass went 'urk'; the Filii Terram were not the sort of club one bragged about, especially not in the middle of 'Unicorn Central'-- "And a world class boob in his own right!" this elicited a good bit of laughter. "This, Fillies and Gentlecots, along with his Deputy Piccolo--" Piccolo cringed under his own spotlight-- "And the NOBLE Mayor Granite, Elder of the Filii Terram--" It was hard to tell in the glare but one could guess that the blood was draining from Mayor Granite's face---

"Yes, these three gentleponies led the way for their entire town...

"Abandoning two foals to their deaths in timberwolf-infested woods," Trixie continued, her amplified voice suddenly dropping to a chilly monotone. "Because, after all, they were just worthless half-bloods. " Trixie strutted across the stage. "Oh yes. Dear Jasper here, before his ascension, was a unicorn orphan in the Sheriff's racist little mudhole in the road. He-- and a unicorn filly, the daughter of a traveling mailmare--" she waved to a grey pegasus hovering in the back with her daughter on her back--"were abandoned to their doom by these, brave, heroic, stallionly stallions for the crime of being... well, anything but an earth pony." She leaned down over the edge of the stage, staring Brass in the eye. "Were it not for him blackmailing me into doing his job for him, they would have died. I took the orphan his town despised under my wing, and left his wretched hive of bigots. In vengeance he has pursued me across the length and breadth of Equestria, hounding me... for fear that I might
reveal the unsavory truth about him."

She smiled. "Whoops."

"YOU SHUT YOUR PIEHOLE, YOU NO-ACCOUNT FRAUD!" Brass bellowed. "You're going away for so long you'll be an old mare by the time you see daylight again! Arrest her, you idiots!" The deputies found their nerve again and started moving again. But before any of them could reach the stage, there was a sound of hundreds of beating wings. Out of the sky dropped dozens of royal guards, their armor gleaming in the sun. They landed with a clash of armor, taking positions around the crowd and in front of the stage.

"Halt!" one of them said. "Day Watch. What goes on here?"

Sheriff Brass went from seething to smug. Now this nag would see what it meant to mess with an officer of the law! "Officer, I am Sheriff Brass of Promise Town. Arrest this no-account! She is a wanted criminal! A fugitive from justice all over Equestria!"

"My that is a serious charge," said a voice from above. Startled, everypony looked up. It was Celestia's chariot, hovering above the crowd, Celestia herself reclining within. The crowd parted, opening a landing space. Everypony bowed hastily. She regarded the portly sheriff. "You were saying?" Only those that knew her well would know there was something off about her Pony Lisa smile at the moment.

Sheriff Brass got to his hooves and stuck his chest out. "Ma'am, er, Your Majesty, this mare is a wanted felon, a fugitive from justice. She is guilty of breach of contract, illegal performance, transport of illegal goods-- then fireworks-- across county lines... slander..." he gave Trixie a hateful glare from the corner of his eye. "abducting a foal, corruption of minors--and that colt is an accomplice..."

Celestia held up a hoof. "You need say no more." She looked to the guard, her smile gone. "Officer, do your duty and arrest the miscreants."

"Hah!" Brass crowed... just as the hoofcuffs locked around his cannons. "What?!" He looked around; his deputies and the good Mayor as well were being cuffed.

Celestia leaned toward him. She was no longer smiling. "Sheriff, I already have spoken with Trixie Lulamoon and her ward. And I have by my own means confirmed her version of what happened in the little town of Promise. So let me give you the short list," she said. "Dereliction of duty--- you've abandoned your post for most of a YEAR, Sheriff--- child endangerment, libel, slander, swearing out false arrest warrants, filing false charges, exercising your civil authority outside your jurisdiction, harassment of a private citizen... interfering with the mail..." she waved to Derpy, who waved back. "Oh my, I do believe you, FORMER Sheriff of Promise, are going to be spending a great deal of time in the legal system on the other side of the bars."

Sheriff Brass gaped at her. He started gibbering. "This, but this this is ridiculous! She's a criminal! I know her background-- she's guilty of unleashing an Ursa Major on a civilian population center--"

"Actually it was two local colts who did that," Celestia said, idly examining a hoof. "She was exonerated."

"She used an illegal dark magic artifact.. nearly destroyed a town..."

"The Alicorn Amulet was not, at the time, illegal," Celestia retorted, buffing her hoof and examining
it again. "And as she was not in her right mind under its influence. She was given a full pardon by the Crown."

Ex-Sheriff Brass gabbled. He pointed at Trixie and Jasper with his cuffed hooves. "They're standing right there impersonating royalty!!!"

It was Celestia's next word that dropped the world out from under his hooves. She looked up from her hoof, feigning surprise.

"...Impersonating?"

"Ah, that's right, Sheriff," Trixie chipped in from the stage. "Tested, and confirmed. Jasper and I ascended. We really are an alicorn Princess and Prince."

"Oh, Princess Lulamoon," Celestia said as Sheriff Brass went eeeeeeeeee. "I'm sorry I arrived late. I did want to be on time for such a novel and entertaining royal coming out."

"Think nothing of it, Prin-- ahem, Celestia," Trixie said loftily. Celestia chuckled and nodded in approval. "If anypony knows the value of a fashionably late and stylish entrance, it is the Great and Powerful Trixie. Princess. Princess Trixie. Oh poo," she said, sticking out her tongue. "It just doesn't rrrrrroll quite right anymore..."

Celestia laughed at the new Princess' antics, then turned her attention back to the cuffed and bewildered ponies being lined up before her. "Sheriff, Mayor, it's basically like this," she said gently. "You've both been sacked. Canned. Deep Sixed. Fired with extreme prejudice. You are no longer civil servants, and are probably going to jail. I will be appointing a new interim Mayor for your town, along with Sheriff, Secretary, Treasurer, and any other office I deem fit all the way down to street sweeper and dog catcher. After, oh, five years, we'll see if your town of Promise is capable of handling electing new town officials.

"All ponies have the inalienable right to freedom of association--- to buy, sell, trade, neighbor, fellowship, or NOT do those things, with any pony they wish, and no matter what anyone else thinks of their reasons for doing so. You were perfectly in your rights to go off and make your own little community for yourself and likeminded ponies, and to insist that you not be bothered by those who were not. But your right to swing your hoof ends where other ponies' noses begin. You violated countless laws to persecute two innocent ponies, and your racially motivated dereliction of duty nearly cost two foals their lives. The *Filii Terram* is a foolish hate group filled with bitter racist ponies too stupid to grasp basic pony genetics, and I won't tolerate any town in Equestria being run by them."

Deputy Piccolo spoke up, cowering. "Bu-- but why? What do you have against ponies who just want to keep their blood lines pure?"

She gently pulled the Mayor, the Sheriff, and the Deputy in close with one wing. "You silly, silly ponies," she said, pityingly, with the air of someone explaining something to a very simpleminded child. "You despise innocent ponies for having a mixed heritage. *What do you suppose MY parentage was*?"

---

The very emotionally bedraggled criminals were finally dragged away. Celestia was speaking quietly with her two new little alicorns off to one side. Trixie... was shaking with silent laughter. "Whatever is wrong, Trixie?" Celestia said, puzzled.
"I know I'm an alicorn now," Trixie sniggered hysterically, her eyes squeezed shut and her face frozen in an absolutely villainous grin as she relived the expression on Sheriff Brass' face. "But I feel like such a little weasel...!"

Celestia started giggling herself. The expressions on their faces when she told them she was from a mixed heritage... Common sense would tell you that any alicorn alive came from a different parentage than their race. Were ponies truly so simple? "Well, I do hope you feel up to continuing with the performance," Celestia said, "as unconventional as it is, as a coming out party it certainly beats yet another coronation." There were surely nobles throwing a screaming fit elsewhere of course, but they were few and far between. After coronating six princesses simultaneously, even the most devout traditionalist in Canterlot was kind of sick of the whole thing.

"The Fabulous Princess Trixie--- oo that one works--- and her illustrious assistant, passing up a stage?" Trixie said. "Haha! It is to laugh. Come, Jasper!" She leapt back onto the stage... then she and her adopted son turned and bowed to the reclining Sun Princess, glitter-dusted wings spread and horns lowered. "And... thank you."

"No," Celestia said softly. "Thank you." She sat back in her chariot as Prince Jasper and Princess Lulamoon took the center stage.

Softly, Sunset Shimmer crept up beside her. "So, teach," she said shyly, "How'd I do?"

Celestia chuckled and motioned for her erstwhile pupil to join her in the chariot. "Very good," she said. "-- for your first outing," she added with a wink.

"AND NOW, WITHOUT FURTHER ADO, THE GREATEST MAGIC SHOW IN EQUESTRIA--- WITH PRINCE JASPER AND PRINCESS LULAMOOOOOOON!"
"Well this is...." Twilight chuckled, chagrined.

"...Awkward," Rainbow Dash finished for her.

"Isn't it though," the newly crowned Princess Lulamoon said. She held her stiff pose where she sat for a moment longer, then reclined with a sigh before the magic mirror array, settling comfortably into the bedpillows. "Fie on it all. I'll be the first to say it; could we just let bygones be bygones? Back in, back in Ponyville I was..." she cleared her throat before continuing; "I was wrong for the things I did, took things too far... I'm willing to drop it all and start fresh if you are."

There was a certain air of relief in the muted responses. "Like a wise old pony said, 'holdin' a grudge is like drinkin' poison and waitin' for the other pony to die,'" Applejack said. Her horn winked with light briefly. She gave a little twitch as her Element nudged her, and looked a little chagrined. "And... aw shoot, my Element ain't going to let it slide, is it?"

At Trixie's mystified expression, Celestia explained. "The six of them are... well, suffice it to say that they were the Bearers of the Elements of Harmony before their ascendance. Now as alicorns they are avatars of those Elements, embodying them... It makes them unique, even among alicorns. (My how strange it is to say that...) What dear Applejack is saying is that her own Element of Honesty...is giving her a bit of a nudge to be more honest about how events transpired." Celestia's voice turned a trifle wry at that. "Would that be a fair summary, Princess Applejack?"

Applejack grumbled and ducked her head behind her hatbrim. "Shoot," she said again. "You're right, Princess. We didn't exactly come out smelling like roses ourselves when we first met Trixie either." She sighed and raised her head to look Trixie's reflection square in the eye. "You may have been a showoff, but you were puttin' on a show. An' all of us were out there hecklin' you an' all but jumpin' out of our horseshoes for a chance to show you up. I woulda tanned Applebloom's tail for actin' the way we did. I'm sorry." Her delivery was straightforward, civil and polite; it wasn't courtly manners but it was more manners than most of the court would have shown.

"Yeah, I wanna apologize too," Rainbow Dash said. She flushed. "I just wanted to take you down a peg. Didn't think about how it felt-- not till it happened to me." Her memory flashed back to a purple-caped figure.

Trixie chose to reciprocate. "Trixie accepts your apologies," she said formally. She rubbed her forehooves together awkwardly. She was aware she was slipping into third person, but it was an old habit when she got nervous or intimidated. "Trixie would extend one as well. She had-- spent a long time playing the flamboyant blowhard as part of her act and... she... lost herself in the role, somewhat," she admitted with surprising meekness. "And the Amulet... believe me, when she found it, all she wanted was to rank up her magic a bit so she could start putting on better shows. But once she put it on...." she cast her eyes down. "She is... I am... sorry."

"As you said, darling," Rarity said. "What's in the past is in the past. We're, well we're practically family now."

"Maker save us all," Trixie said dryly. The others giggled.

Trixie chose to reciprocate. "Trixie accepts your apologies," she said formally. She rubbed her forehooves together awkwardly. She was aware she was slipping into third person, but it was an old habit when she got nervous or intimidated. "Trixie would extend one as well. She had-- spent a long time playing the flamboyant blowhard as part of her act and... she... lost herself in the role, somewhat," she admitted with surprising meekness. "And the Amulet... believe me, when she found it, all she wanted was to rank up her magic a bit so she could start putting on better shows. But once she put it on...." she cast her eyes down. "She is... I am... sorry."

"As you said, darling," Rarity said. "What's in the past is in the past. We're, well we're practically family now."

"Maker save us all," Trixie said dryly. The others giggled.

T" Twilight crossed her forehooves and leaned in. "So tell us what you've been up to since you left
Ponyville last," she said. "Celestia told us the basics, but I get the feeling there's a lot of details she left out. I understand you're a mother now?"

"Adoptive," Trixie corrected. "Thanks to Princess Celestia and Princess Sunset Shimmer, the paperwork went through the day after they found us." A look of contentment crossed her face. "Jasper was so happy."

"Well, he's got to be excited," Spike said. The adolescent dragon was sitting next to Twilight, "taking the minutes" of their meeting. "First alicorn prince of Equestria. Um, well, technically second, after Prince Shining Armor. Or does he not count because he's in the Crystal Empire?" He put his quill to his lip, thinking it over.

Celestia and Trixie looked at one another. Celestia gave an absolutely impish giggle. "Going by how the press are taking to him, our new Prince Jasper wins by a landslide."

"The latest media darling, huh?" Twilight chuckled.

"See for yourself. Oh, new trick with the mirrors, Twilight..." Celestia levitated up her compact and tapped it to her mirror.

*Her image vanished and was replaced by a slightly shaky image of the view from a balcony. It took the watchers a moment to realize they were seeing a playback of something viewed from the perspective of the compact as it hung around the wearer's neck(1). The view changed as Celestia turned, to reveal a young colt standing next to her. He had apparently been groomed to within an inch of his life. He was wearing a short royal purple cloak of impeccable cut that just covered his shoulders between his wings, and a thin golden circlet on his brow. His hooves were polished, his russet red coat gleamed, and his purple mane had slicked back in a pompadour, making the horn on his brow stand out all the more. He stood tall and proud, carried his head high and kept a calm, regal expression on his face.*

"Oh, he's going to be a heartbreaker when he grows up," Cadence cooed.

"Going to be?" Celestia quipped. At Cadence's curious look she just chuckled.

"Too bad he's too young for you, Lulu," Pinkie said sympathetically, patting her traveling partner on the shoulder.

"Pinkie--!"

"He's certainly got the royal bearing down quickly," Rarity commented.

Trixie waved a hoof. "We do a lot of short skits in our shows: HoofSpear, Mane of La Mancha, the Hearthwarming, all the classics," she said. "I told him to mix a little King Lament with a touch of a Tale of Two Princes... the tragically noble one that is."

*In the mirror view, Celestia could be heard asking, "nervous?" Jasper caught his breath and nodded, briefly. "No need to be," Celestia reassured him. The view turned back, till the viewers were looking down over the rail of the balcony. The courtyard below, a touch out of focus, was a teeming throng.*

*There was a brief fanfare. "Welcome, My Little Ponies," Celestia said. "I am glad you are all here today." There was a round of cheers and applause. "It is my pleasure to finally grant your request for an audience, so that you could meet your newest prince. Would you like to meet him?"

The shouts of "yes," were loud, enthusiastic, and oddly high pitched.
"Then I present to you, Prince Jasper, Alicorn of Flame," she said. She stepped aside. Jasper stepped up on the dais and looked down over the courtyard, head high, mane teased lightly in the breeze, circlet gleaming, as regal in bearing as if he'd been to the manner born.

The courtyard exploded into hysterical screams.

"What the sam hill...?" Applejack spoke for them all.

_Celestia's compact mirror apparently finally drifted into focus, revealing the courtyard below packed from end to end... with fillies. Unicorn and earth pony fillies waving signs and banners decorated with hearts and kisses, pegasus and batpony fillies giving the cordon of royal guards fits as they tried to fly up closer to the balcony, even a sea pony or two going into hysterics in the fountain. Scattered among the masses were a few adults with the longsuffering expressions of world-weary parents, but they were a vanishing minority.

"Allow me to present," said the real-time Celestia with wry amusement, "the Prince Jasper Fan Club."

_The poor overwhelmed colt in the recording looked frozen in terror, his eyes round as balloons. Heroically, he put back on the aloof mask he'd been wearing and waved to the shrieking crowds. This only redoubled the hysteria._

"It would seem that the dear boy photographs nicely. He became the darling of the press the moment he and Trixie made their debut." Celestia went on as the image faded. "He can't seem to walk past a balcony or window in the castle without some mob of fillies starting a ruckus." It was doubtful any of those watching the recording even heard her; they were all laughing so hard at Jasper's expression in the image they were in danger of choking.

Trixie merely lounged back and feigned a sigh of annoyance. "It figures," she said to noone in particular. "Trixie gets all the way to Canterlot Castle, only to be upstaged by her assistant--!"

There was a groan from offscreen. "Aww, Princess Celestia," Jasper whined, "did you have to show them that...?" Good natured teasing and chivvying brought him out from hiding. He stood in front of the mirrors, blushing and looking like he wanted to disappear while the mares cooed and chuckled over him. He bore up under it, though. It was easy to see that under all the embarrassment he was pleased at the positive attention-- after a cruel foalhood full of hateful attention from the _Filii Terram_, more than one of them realized with a sad start, it must have been a wondrous change. He had no way of knowing it, but at that moment he gained a circle of adoring foster aunts, and heaven help any bully, brute or bigot who tried to lay a hoof on him.

"Already popular with the fillies, huh?" Dash teased. Jasper grumbled something and flopped down next to his mother, his face flaming.

"Not just the fillies, either," Trixie chipped in. She smirked slyly at Jasper, and made duck lips at him. "The maids and the court ladies think he's just adowwable."

"Mom--!"

"Got a kiss on the cheek from no less than Fleur De Lis," Celestia said.

"The fashion model? Dates Fancy Pants? Dude!" Spike exclaimed. The little dragon gave the mirror a thumbs up. Jasper buried his face in his forehooves, but there was no hiding the grin inching across his face.

After the laughter died down, Twilight spoke up. "So will you and Jasper... be joining the search?"
"Actually, no," Trixie said apologetically. "Her maj-- ahem, Celestia-- thinks it would be better if we stayed in Canterlot and, well--" she fluttered her wingtips. "took some time to smooth off some of our rough edges." She lowered her eyes a bit. "A life in front of the footlights does not exactly a royal debutante make."

"Plus," she added, "I would like to give Jasper... a little more stability than we've had these last couple of years. A regular roof over our heads, and maybe a chance to get him caught up on his education---"


"Oh, it won't be so bad," Celestia reassured him. "There are more than a few colts and fillies here in the castle who need schooling, so we have a tutor for them all. Noble pony's children, and servants and staff too-- you'll fit in quite well with them. And one little filly in particular who's mother just got promoted to the royal delivery service...I believe you know her?"

"Dinky?" Jasper perked up immediately. Maybe going back to school wouldn't be so bad after all.

"As for me, outside my ah, sprucing up on my courtly etiquette," Trixie said, "Sunset Shimmer wants to work with me and study my illusions technique." She preened a little bit. "She says she's never seen such intricate or stunningly effective illusions, and the way they interacted with my natural alicorn obfuscation field... well, my methods may provide a clue in how to find alicorns that are still in hiding, or methods they may be using to amplify their own anonymity."

Twilight made a sound of curiosity. "Really? I would like to look at your notes myself, if you get a chance to send them to me..."

Trixie actually grinned a little. "Oooh, the legendary Twilight Sparkle wants to read MY notes?" She clapped her hooves together. "How gratifying!" Then she frowned. "How will I mail them to you, though?" she said. "You're on that tour..."

Twilight facehoofed. "Right, that is a problem...."

Rainbow Dash looked up. "Oh, well why don't you just--"

"Maybe if I sent a copy ahead to your next stop?" Trixie said.

"But guys, you can just--" Rainbow said.

"I'm not sure where you'd deliver them," Twilight said. "We do get postal stopovers, but scheduling them is so complicated...

"Surely the captain of the ship has mail for his crew?" Rarity interjected.

"Yes, but it's always had those problems, I'm told," Twilight said, chewing her lip. "It's one of the oldest problems plaguing the Equestrian Military. Mail getting misrouted, or lost... even with pegasus couriers it's a mess--"

"Guys..."

"Well what about--"

GUYS!" Everypony finally stopped talking and looked at Rainbow Dash. Wordlessly, the former
Everypony stared, openmouthed. Then there were facehooves all around. "So... obvious..." Twilight groaned. "But how would we save--"

"Camera," Rainbow Dash said.

"Oh. Of course." Twilight rubbed her chin. "Maybe Quick Quill's Tracing Cantrip will work, too..."

Luna crowed with delight. "Won't the Captains of our proud armed forces hail this boon to their communications, Sister!" she said. "Brilliant, dear Rainbow!"

"And what it will mean for the private sector as well, when the mirrors trickle their way down to them," Celestia said. "Indeed, well done, Princess Rainbow."

Rainbow polished a hoof against her chest. "Hey, maybe you didn't notice, but I do have my moments," she said.

"So where are you all off to now, my little ponies?" Celestia finally asked.

"Oh. We're going to be arriving at our first stop soon," Fluttershy said. "The nature preserve at the Unicorn Mountains. The Colt Scout Jamboree is being held there this year." She clapped her hooves and gave a little squee. "Oh, it's going to be so wonderful seeing all those young ponies, watching them experience nature for the first time..."

Awkward glances, sly looks, and amused grimaces were exchanged. Fluttershy was shy and sweet and demure and it was a source of perpetual bafflement to her friends as to how she could remain utterly oblivious to the absolute chaos she could wreak on the male population merely by walking in
their midst. Then again, that chaotic potential was probably what made Discord's friendship with her possible...

More than one mare present quietly yet visibly reflected on the dynamics of several hundred awkward young colts just hitting puberty, a few dozen gung-ho woodsy stallion troop leaders, and one of the top five former supermodels in Equestria---who also happened to be the most timid, easily panicked and gun-shy mare in the Equestrian hemisphere---out in the wilderness together. Visions of everything from runaway male braggadocio to panicked stampedes flashed through everypony's mind. "Oh boy," was the murmured verdict from Spike.

"And the Filly Scout Jamboree will be joining us in a day or so too," Fluttershy added. "Oh, it's going to be so exciting!"

"Exciting is... ONE word I could use," Celestia murmured.

A few hundred fillies, plus a few hundred colts, all of whom were vacillating back and forth on whether the other side all had cooties. Throwing one nature-loving ravishing beauty into the middle was going to be like tossing a breath mint into a jug of diet cola. Twilight Sparkle silently rounded her estimate of the potential mayhem up by a factor of ten. Another awful thought bubbled to the surface. "Um... are you worried about getting along with--well, I mean, the animals out in the Unicorn Range aren't exactly as familiar with ponies as the ones in Ponyville or Canterlot. They might be a little, well, reluctant to make friends..." She winced as she said it.

Memories of the Canterlot elite fleeing for their lives from the stampeding menagerie--or perhaps from the raging, screaming beauty in their wake--flitted across several minds. "Oh boy." This time it was Celestia who muttered it.

Fluttershy blushed at the inadvertent reminder of her little 'incident' at the Grand Galloping Gala. "Oh, I know," she said. "But I've gotten better since...that time at the gala. And I'm pretty sure I know what went wrong that time..."

Not every pony looked concerned. Dash, for one, had an expression on her face that was positively evil. "Hey Flutters? You have a staff photographer, right?"

Fluttershy nodded. "I tend to avoid her, though," she confessed.

Dash's smile would have scared the Devil. "That's cool. Just be sure and tell her to take lots and lots of photos of the Jamboree."

Fluttershy smiled. "Oh I will. I'm sure we'll be talking about this Jamboree for years to come."

"Strewth," Luna said, carefully not meeting Fluttershy's eye.

"AAAAaand so where are you and my sister headed next, Pinkie Pie?" Celestia eagerly changed the topic.

"Oh we've been cruising slow and easy," Pinkie Pie said. "Dropping "happy coronation" party balloons and favors and cupcakes whenever we pass over a town..."

Rarity looked puzzled. "How do you 'drop' balloons?" she pondered.

"You tie 'em to the cupcakes," Pinkie clarified.

"Ah, of course."
"Anyway, our first stop is sort of de riguer for any proper professional party pony," Pinkie said. "Maredi Gras. There'll be parades and dancing and food and they'll pick the King of Fat Shoesday and there'll be food and drinks and cakes with little dollies baked in them--" She gave the Princess of the Night a neck-cracking hug. "Ooooo, we're gonna have so much FUN!"

"Which means you and I shall be crossing paths," Rarity said with a smile. "As I am already right in the heart of Maredi Gras territory. Only befitting that two of us 'Mane Six,' as the ponies have taken to calling us, come together to celebrate little Necturus' coronation." She tittered. "The mayor of Neigh Orleans is in a giddy fit; they're going to fit Mudpuppy's coronation into the festivities. It seems 'King Felix' is going to be accompanied in the Grand Parade by a genuine princess this year."

"Where have you and Luna been, Pinkie?" Twilight asked, puzzled. "If Neigh Orleans was your first stopoff, shouldn't you and Rarity have arrived at the same time?"

"Celebrating National Pickle Week in Vinegar Stills," Luna deadpanned. "Woo, what a party." She tapped a jar next to her hoof. "Whereas that noble city hath but one major product, namely Vinegar, they make the most of it. Ne'er had I any notion that so many things are, or could be, pickled. Cucumbers, eggs, beets, watermelon, carrots, mangoes, lemons, peppers---"

"Ooo, pickled peppers?" Celestia said. "Send me some?"

Luna stuck out her tongue and wrinkled her nose. "Thee and thy cravings..."

"We shipped you a whole sampler crate," Pinkie said. "I picked out them all myself for you, Celly."

"So Pinkie Pie picked the Princess a pack of pickled produce?" Spike said, grinning. Twilight gave him a longsuffering look.

"Don't say that again," she said. "Just... don't."

"Say it again? I'm not even sure I can write it!"

"YYYYeah. As for me and my crew, same old, same old," Rainbow Dash said. "Heading out to do a show at Windy City. I'm kinda looking forward to it... there aren't that many pegasus cities that are actually built on the ground."

"That's only because Windy City, like its sister city Misty Mountain, sits on a mountain so tall it pokes up through the cloudline," Twilight pointed out. "It has a permanent ring of clouds around it and--"

"And totally mackin' updrafts and windcurrents, yeah," Rainbow Dash agreed. "Can't wait to feel that wind through my primaries. And they have all sorts of extreme sports out there, too. Any alicorn with a pegasus background... or just an itch in their wings... is gonna be out there. Shoot, there are tons of earth ponies and unicorns there just for the parasailing."

Applejack shuddered. "They're welcome to it. This Earth Pony is just fine with her hooves on solid earth-- or good sturdy oak planks."

"Hm. As I recall, they also have the second largest unicorn academy in Equestria there, after the one in Canterlot," Twilight said. "That increases the odds of finding an alicorn immensely."

"I gotta ask: what is it with unicorns and mountains, anyway?" Applejack said. "Canterlot, the Castle of the Pony Sisters up on that bluff-- Even Princess Platinum lived in a castle up on a mountaintop, way back when."
"Oh, that's just Rincewind Arcology Syndrome," Rarity said with a wave of her hoof.

Applejack gave her a bemused look. "Beg pardon?"

"She's right," Twilight said, giving a slightly embarrassed smile. "It's a sort of nesting instinct that affects unicorns, particularly ones that specialize heavily in arcane research like myself." She flapped a wing. "Or... unicorn like I used to be. Anyway. We have this sort of overpowering instinct to find a location to do all our magic in, fortify it, and build vertically. The higher the better."

"Like wizard towers," Spike offered helpfully.

Several ponies went "ohhh" as they got the idea. "And castles on mountaintops," Dash said.

"Castles with lots of towers, I might note," Celestia added with a chuckle.

"And trees with libraries in them?" Applejack said, with an amused look at Twilight. "Or book forts?"

Twilight nodded and sighed. "Or observatories at the top of towers," she said, remembering back to her quarters in the palace. "All unicorns are susceptible to the urge to some degree. If you look at Carousel Boutique, Rarity's bedroom is right at top, in that little cupola tower thingy. They say Starswirl the Bearded had it so bad he couldn't sleep away from home unless he built a pillow-fort on top of a stack of barrels. The going theory for the reason is that our ancestors got tired of the other tribes sneaking up behind them and popping paper bags while they were trying to study the workings of the universe." She shrugged. "Anyway... how are things going with you, Applejack?"

"Oh, highs and lows, I suppose," Applejack chuckled. "The Cherry Jamboree went well. No alicorn sightin's, though. And Applebloom had a bit of a rough time. Bit of a ruckus involvin' a beekeeper an' some colt's hat..."

The story earned chuckles and moans of sympathy from the listeners. "Poor filly," Rarity said. "No offense, Applejack dear, but she does seem to have a rather touchy stomach for a pony from your family's line of work."

Applejack smiled ruefully. "She's usually fine about most stuff," she said. "I mean, she'll dive into most mucky farm stuff, no problem. But then somepony'll hit her from a direction she wasn't expectin', and..." she shrugged. "It'll be a few days afore she'll look sideways at a jar o' honey, but she'll get over it. Leastways it wasn't as bad as when she learned about where milk came from. She wouldn't touch it for weeks. She finally came around, though."

"Lemme guess," Pinkie said with a knowing look. "Slice of chocolate cake?"

"Bingo."

"Wait'll she hears about mushrooms," Jasper muttered.

"She knows," Applejack said. "She got over it." She paused. "Big Mac ain't, though.... he still leaves the room when we order a pizza." She sighed. "Anyhow, our next whistle stop is a farm tool convention over in Little Bighorn. I ain't expecting much in the way of alicorn activity there, but you never know."

"And I... might have a lead," Twilight said. She looked a touch apprehensive. "But I'm going to have to be a bit... unconventional about investigating it..." she rubbed her hooves over one another, like a foal getting ready to ask for something she wasn't sure she could have.
"Go on," Celestia said, curious.

"Well I was doing a tour of the Manehattan Museum of Natural History," Twilight said, the words tumbling out. "--Such an amazing place! and what they have on display is just the tip of the iceberg... miles and miles of tunnels and storerooms full of artifacts and archives and exhibits... and, while the director was showing me around, I stumbled across-- or rather, Flash Sentry stumbled across--" she grimaced in annoyance. She'd told him to keep his hooves to himself... "Some data about unusual goings-on in a little place known as Hollow Shades.

"Very strange things, in fact. It's an old community, very secretive and apparently has a very, um, rich and vivid folklore. Ghosts, specters, strange incidents, inexplicable phenomena, reports of strange creatures, that sort of thing. They sent out researchers, even a couple of paranormal investigators, but... well, what they found was inconclusive.

"There's not much to go on, but Flash Sentry says something about the reports sets off his instincts..."

"And you trust his instincts?" Celestia said.

Twilight bit her lip. "I'm... learning to," she admitted. More truthfully, she thought silently to herself, was that she'd found herself arguing with him about it-- and rational or not, she'd caught herself sounding an awful lot like when she'd argued with Pinkie Pie about her Pinky Sense. Call it irrational but she wasn't willing to make the same mistake twice, even if it was entirely by chance. "Sometimes you have to accept that other ponies have instincts you don't, I guess. Besides, a wild hunch is better than nothing to follow."

"So what do you mean by 'unconventional'?" Celestia pressed.

"I'm not going to take the zeppelin in," she said. "The ponies there are reportedly reclusive and skittish, and they might not react well to a zeppelin full of guards and royalty bombing out of the sky on them. I'm going to go in, um, well, alone. Mostly."

"Alone?" Celestia sounded concerned.

"Mostly. Just myself and a couple of guards, undercover. We'll be posing as Equineology students from the Manehattan University. They've seen one or two students there before so we shouldn't be too alarming. A couple of panniers over my wings and I'm just another unicorn undergraduate studying the local folklore."

Celestia frowned, but nodded. "One request, please, Twilight. Well, two, actually."

"Anything, Princess," came the automatic reply.

"Bring Spike with you." Spike sat up and saluted smartly.

"Spike?" Twilight started to protest. "But he's--"

"A baby dragon, yes, I know," Celestia said with a sigh. "But more to the point, dear Twilight, he's a baby DRAGON. He's magic resistant, has scales like armor plating, can bite through diamonds, wade through molten rock and breathes fire. You really do underestimate him," Celestia chided.

"Spike, listen to me. I know you've spent your life being as careful as you can be to not hurt others. But over the centuries I've heard some of the legends coming out of Hollow Shades myself, and I am asking you-- no, telling you-- if you or Twilight are in danger, do not hold back."

"Are you sure?" Spike asked hesitantly.
"Cuts and bites and breaks and burns can be mended, Spike," Celestia said gently. "But nothing can mend the regret of inaction. Yes, I am sure."

Spike nodded. "I understand," he said.

Celestia addressed her former student. "As for my second request: Make sure that Flash Sentry is one of the ponies who accompanies you."

Twilight frowned. "Specifically him? Why? I know he's Captain of my Guard, but won't he be needed back on the ship to--"

"I know you dislike his somewhat slapdash approach to paperwork and organization, Twilight," Celestia interrupted, making Twilight blush. "But I have been routinely impressed with his instincts in a crisis. It is no fluke; he has senses and instincts, keen as any razor blade, that would do a veteran guard thrice his age proud. He expects the unexpected, and I would have no other pony to watch your back." She dimpled. "I wasn't just trying to play cupid when I promoted him to your Captain, Twilight."

Twilight humphed indignantly. Her and Flash Sentry? Ridiculous. Nevertheless she nodded. Spoken aloud or not, she couldn't help feel a little safer knowing that the Captain of the Guard was going to be at her back.

"Very well, my little Ponies," Celestia said. "All of you, I wish you good luck. And be careful!"

1) 

1) Celestia had replaced one of the gems in her peytral with a notch for her magic mirror compact. It wasn't a GoPro, but it did the job.
Daring Do carefully turned the crystal box between her hooves, scrutinizing it closely through a jeweler's loupe. "Anyway," she said. "It's about what I figured..."

"And that would be?" Celestia said, carefully holding her patience.

Daring pushed aside an armload of archaeologist's tools and set the box down on the worktable in front of her. The cavern below the Castle of the Two Sisters had become quite cluttered since her arrival at the Princess' behest. "Well, yer Maj, let's start with the basics," she said, tipping her pith helmet back. "First off, we know the Tree of Harmony is an artifact predating yourself and your sister and even Discord by... well, there are records of it going as far back as there are records. There are even cave paintings of it."

"An artifact?" Celestia's mirror-image swam briefly.

Daring nodded. "Made by who knows who--- some legends say one ancient civilization, some say another. Some say the Maker himself, shortly after the beginning of the world. But no, definitely an artifact."

"And how does one determine that?" Celestia said, both skeptical and curious. "As opposed to it being, say, a natural living thing?"

"Put in layponies' terms, The same way you know a funny-shaped rock isn't just a funny shaped rock, but a tool-- it has a handle," Daring Do said. She held up an arrowhead dangling from a thong around her neck. "Or grooves for a handle, anyway. The Tree of Harmony may look like a tree, but the way it behaves says 'tool.' Something made to be used by ponies. It pops out six magic necklaces, then a magic six-sided box? It's as obvious as a tree that sprouts teaspoons."

Celestia nodded. "Agreed," she said. "I just felt it necessary to play the arbitrary skeptic."

Daring Do nodded in acknowledgment, back to staring at the box. "Any way, it's obvious purpose is to serve as a way to maintain and restore harmony, duh. Keeping everything in balance. That's what it's been doing for the Everfree, after all."

Celestia frowned. "I would hardly call the Everfree harmonious," she said in disapproval.

Daring Do looked up and grinned at the princess. "Really?" she said. "The plants grow without anypony. The animals take care of themselves. And the clouds move-- all on their own," she recited. "An entire forest that lives and grows and thrives, perfectly balanced against itself, without anypony there to care for it. Think about it."

Celestia's mouth formed an "o" of surprise. "That's right," Daring Do said. "I've been all over the world, Princess; in deserts and jungles and swamps and grasslands and everything in between; places where no pony-- or any other being--- has ever been. Most of the world is more like the Everfree than it was ever like Equestria. The precipitation cycle, the food chain....there's more than one kind of harmony out there, and they have nothing to do with the work of ponies." She tapped the trunk of the Tree, eliciting a chiming note.

"Of course after Nightmare Moon, the Tree of Harmony sensed you and all the other ponies leaving, and re-started the natural ecosystem here. Since you weren't using the territory anymore, and all."
When the Plunder Vines attacked, that threw the Everfree's cycles out of whack, so it needed the power of the Elements back to restore balance."

"I...see," Celestia said, fascinated. She and Luna had been foals when Discord had risen to power; all she had known was either Discord's uncontrolled chaos, or Equestria's carefully groomed order. She had known of other lands where nature was not so finely controlled, but had never occurred to her that Equestria might be the exception, rather than the rule-- or that such places might have their own sort of harmonious balance. This would bear much thinking about.

Daring Do went on. "Anyway, the Tree's purpose is to encourage Harmony all around it. I figure the Elements were designed as a sort of.... detachable tool, for 'spot-cleaning.' When a serious disharmony pops up, you take the Elements from the Tree, go find the problem, and Friendship Beam the stuffing out of it. Like you did with Discord and Nightmare Moon.

"Of course the drawback is that they're kind of crude; really broad-brush, brute-force. Point 'em at the disharmony, and they do the first thing that pops into their heads to fix that particular problem. Or.... as close to whatever pops into the bearer's heads, maybe. Like turning a chaos entity to stone and a broad-spectrum spell-undo over the surrounding area. Or... well, in your case... they probably sensed you didn't want to hurt Princess Luna or imprison her in stone, you just wanted to contain her. So it picked 'banishment' instead."

Celestia felt the need to move the conversation back to the original topic. "And... what about the box?" she pressed.

"One track mind, huh?" Daring Do said with a smirk. "Well, first off I'd say this means the Tree shows Lemurian influences in its design."

"The Lemurians?"

"The Lemurians. Or... maybe the Lemurians were influenced by the tree..." Daring shook her head. "Anyway, your ancient Lemurians were big on making powerful artifacts, devices and weapons, but they were also big on really redundant safety features. They were the first culture to create combination locks and safety triggers."

"Very cautious, were they?" Celestia said.

"Eh, you have to know your Lemurs. Paranoid little primates." Daring Do shrugged. "The Elements? Very Lemurian design mentality. Think about it: a harmony super-weapon that requires at least two to six bearers who embody the six principles encoded in the gems. All of them have to be in agreement for it to work, and if any of the Bearers tries to use their Elements against another Bearer, they cease to work for those Bearers permanently. That's a lot of safety features."

"And from what your apprentice Sunset Shimmer tells me, on the other side of the scale there was even an emergency fallback. If one of the Elements was separated from the others-- say by taking it into a pocket or parallel dimension, or by one of them being deactivated somehow--- it would unlock certain default abilities that the Bearer could use. She says that's why she came back to Equestria. She was planning on stealing the Element of Magic, to use back in that world. There are other ways to trigger those independent abilities I'm sure, but once she went back through that magic mirror, it would be totally separated from the others and would unlock its emergency backup powers for her." She shrugged. "Since it was the Element of Magic, it just opened up a generic magic booster. The others probably had Element-specific special abilities, but no telling, now that they've re-merged with the tree.

"And this this box? That just screams ancient Lemurian influence." Daring nodded confidently,
holding the box in one hoof.

"How so?"

Daring Do turned the box. "I made a few preemptive attempts to open the box... before rethinking it, that is... and learned a few things. Six pre Greco-Roamin thaumatic style locks, each with a different key. Pick-proof. Internally aligned so that all six keys have to be inserted, and turned simultaneously. Those are the kind of safeguards the Lemurians put on their most powerful and dangerous artifacts. As powerful as the Elements of Harmony were? Safe to say, whatever's in this box is most likely an upgrade."

"More powerful?" Celestia said faintly, alarmed.

Daring Do looked at the box apprehensively. "Something that the Tree's maker figured needed six simultaneous locks... six MAGICAL locks,... just for safety's sake." She snorted. "I figured that out when it shocked me and shattered my lockpicks; the short nearly blew my fillings out. Smartened up after that and gave it another once-over instead."

Celestia stared at the box through the mirror and rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "There's power and there's power," she said. "It can't possibly be any sort of tool of destruction."

"Maybe," muttered Daring Do. "I know what happened the last time the ancient Lemurians used one of their widgets that had six keys."

"What?"

"The continent of Lemuria sank." Daring Do said grimly, adjusting her pith helmet. "Not often I've had to do an archaeological survey in a diving helmet."

"So," Celestia said. "Any clue as to how we unlock it?"

Daring Do stared at the co-ruler of Equestria, her eyebrows tabled. "I get the feeling you're not hearing half of what I'm saying," she said flatly.

"Have a little more faith, Miss Do," Celestia chided, amused. "The Elements proved themselves to be unremitting instruments for good. Whomever created the Tree and all the hidden wonders within it would not replace them with something harmful." She shifted on the divan she lay on. "This is the crux of the matter; do you believe that this box is dangerous?"

Daring Do chewed her lip. "My paranoia wants to say 'yes,' but.... No," she said, finally.

"And why not?"

"Because while its safety features say 'Lemurian,' everything else says 'Not,'" Daring admitted. "While the Elements were powerful, they were still absolutely benevolent. Friendship Beam, remember? They seemed explicitly designed to avoid doing genuine harm, no matter how aggressively used... I read the friendship letters they sent you; they certainly weren't holding back against Nightmare Moon or Discord-- and the Bearers were really cheesed at Discord. Lemurians weren't quite so nicey-nice about what their artifacts could do." She cocked an eyebrow. "Hence, the sunken continent."

"No, I think the box is... a refinement." She waved a hoof. "Like... an upgrade. You've learned to use the simple tools, kid, now let's break out the more advanced stuff.' I know of a couple of master-apprentice traditions that kept their apprentices' 'graduation tools' in ornate crystal boxes. It was the first thing I thought of when I saw it."
"A more advanced version of the Elements?" Celestia proposed.

"Heh. Something a bit more than that, I'd guess," Daring Do said. "See the shape? Irregular polyhedra. Hexagon on top and bottom, six quadrilateral panels around the top, FIVE quadrilateral panels around the bottom, and one triangular(1)--- but see that last panel on the bottom? The odd one out, shaped like a triangle? what what happens when I flip it over." She rolled the box over and flipped it between her hooves.

Celestia blinked. "The triangular panel... it moved!"

Daring Do nodded. "This is a polychoron," she said, holding it up and peering into one of the keyholes. "A folded four-dimensional shape. Last time I saw one of these it was in a collection of artifacts of nigh-cosmic beings; a genie's bottle." She looked up at the mirror and grinned. "Which means it's bigger on the inside. Way, WAY bigger. And as the vertices are all hinges--- ALL of them, which makes no sense except for a four-dimensional object-- I'm guessing it's designed to completely unfold when activated, sorta like a self-inflating raft." She set the box down on the worktable again. "Nice thing is, whatever's inside a four-dimensional box is perfectly safe, even if the container is destroyed. You coulda smashed that genie's bottle to dust and the genie inside would come out totally unharmed. Bigger than life, mad as hell and with all his furniture piled around his ears, but unharmed." She gave a disgruntled snort. "Of course this thing is a trifle tougher than your typical genie bottle. Found that out just poking at it.

"Either way, I'm not sure anypony but the, er, Alicorns of Harmony?" Daring Do pondered the name; Celestia shrugged as if to say 'good a name as any other.' "Well, I don't think anypony but the Alicorns of Harmony can open it. Six locks means six keys.... but I don't recall you saying any keys popped out of that tree with the box."

"Plus... see these engravings around the sides? This particular repeating pattern? I've seen this in a few tombs and temples in my time-- it generally indicates something like 'test of character.' " She rubbed her chin. "But there's no actual puzzle or riddle on the box itself. So, considering how the Elements were 'unlocked...'

"I wager the new Princesses all have to undergo some sort of epiphany about the virtues they represent. Something to indicate they've reached the next level of enlightenment, or whatever. At which point the latent signature of the Elements still on them will make a key manifest. At which point they have to all come together, insert the keys, and unlock this little party favor to get the crunchy goodness inside."

"Ah, excellent," Celestia said. "So, how long do you think it will take you to circumvent it?"

Daring Do's eyebrows went up. "What? Uh, sorry, Your Sunshinyness, and I know I already sorta jumped the gun a little, but don't you want the new princesses to get the benefit of whatever lesson..."

Celestia interrupted her. "Miss Do, I'm sure you've wondered why I specifically hired you for this particular job. Tell me, at the Temple of the Lesser Sun, how did you get past the accursed locks sealing the sarcophagus?"

"Uh, a bundle of dynamite?" Daring Do winced a bit. She'd gotten an earful about that from the museums; they didn't appreciate her launching chunks of priceless stonework into near orbit.

"And what of the deadly riddle doors in the Maze of Mysteries?"

"I flew over the maze."
"How did you deactivate the Minotaur King's killer golem without the Minotaur crown to control it?"

"It was forty below outside, I just poured water in its gears and let the freeze wrench it apart."

"The cursed plaque of Nunhotep?"

"Sledgehammer... okay I get the point," Daring Do grumbled. "You were looking for a particular kind of problem-solving skillset. But that doesn't exactly answer my question. You REALLY don't mind me trying to crack this thing?"

Celestia gave a sigh and a rueful chuckle. "Miss Do, I recently learned a lesson the hard way," she said. "I learned it takes a real jack-flank to make ponies dance and beg and jump through hoops for something they urgently need, especially when the one playing the game is nothing more than another flawed, finite, limited being like the rest of us. I was so fond of being the mentor, that I forgot that mentors aren't automatically supposed to be cryptic.

"And I find I don't appreciate being made to jump through hoops myself, either. All of Equestria was imperiled more than once because whoever made the Tree and the Elements and the ponies who wrote Prophecies decided to be a cryptic ass about it; I'm not going to tolerate that sort of thing any more.(2) The Mane Six, Equestria itself is going to need whatever is in that box. If we are not 'worthy' of it, then we will simply have to beg the Maker for forgiveness and do our best. These long-dead mystic sages want to play chessmaster with us? Let's see how well they handle it when we switch to kickboxing."

Daring Do gave a dark chuckle. "I like how you think, Princess," she said. "Okay, I'll put my lateral thinking skills back to cracking this box open. Of course there's one thing I'll need..."

"Of course. What?"

Daring Do held up a fifty pound mallet with a shattered handle. "Spare sledgehammer budget. Kinda lost my temper at the thing when it zapped me."

(1) Yes, I looked it up. Remember the blueprint on the wall of Twilight's library?

(2) She wasn't joking. Shortly after the debacle with her number one student, she had passed a few quiet royal decrees. The Guard were now under instructions to take any pony making poetic-sounding prophecies into custody and bring them to the castle where large, unfriendly looking stallions would inform the would-be Nostradamus that they had WAYS to make them talk coherently.
Chapter 32

Spike trotted into the royal guards' quarters aboard the Guiding Star, barely pausing to give the off duty troops a wave as he headed for Flash Sentry's office. He kicked open the door. "Hey Flash!" he said. "We're pulling up on the city in a few, and Twilight wants to go over-- oh, wow." He was brought up short by the sight before him.

Flash Sentry's "private quarters" were a small chamber not much larger than middling office. Half was filled with his bunk, a small wash stand and a rack for his armor, half was filled with a rolltop desk that was festooned with mountains of paperwork, scrolls, files, crumpled bits of parchment and a slumped over pegasus who was running his hooves through his mane like he was trying to knead his brain back into shape. Flash started and looked up. "Oh, uh, hello Sir Spike," he stammered.

Spike cocked an eyebrow. "So I'm a 'Sir,' now?" he asked.

Flash coughed into his hoof. "Um, according to the Princess' latest memo," he said. "You're her seneschal and to be given an honorary knighthood some time in the immediate future, so, uh... yeah."

"Really? Cool, Twi must've been keeping it as a surprise or something. I gotta start reading more of those memos she has me flame-mail." He looked around the cramped office. "Speaking of which..." he waved at the piles of paper. "What's all this?"

Flash tried to shrug it off casually. "Oh, just... trying to catch up on all the paperwork for the Twilight Guard. Ahem." He leaned against the desk casually, wincing as one of the snowdrifts of paper tumbled to the floor in a slow avalanche.

"Man, Twilight is really overdoing it," Spike said.

Flash groaned. "Yeah. She wants checklists to check the checklists. In triplicate! But---" he seemed to bite the bullet. "She's only responsible for, like, the top layer or two..."

"I doubt that."

"No, it's-- it's true. This stuff is just the backlog," Flash confessed. "And being made Captain of the Guard came with about a ton of this stuff, right out of the box. Schedules, requisitions, reports, tons of crap that needs to be documented and written out in triplicate to be filed away in some government office---"

"Why didn't you do it at the time?" Spike said, leafing through some of the paper.

Flash threw his hooves in the air, nearly faceplanting in the desk as a result. "Because I was too busy getting stuff done! The second watch needed new helmets and spears, like, yesterday; that couldn't wait till I inked out a dozen forms! I talked the supply officer into letting me fill out a stub and take the stuff with a promise to fill out the rest of it later. Then we took in three new recruits right before we left port; that was half a stack of forms for each of them. I was too busy fitting them in with the guard we already had... I caught one guard filching soda from the canteen, I couldn't just discipline him and be done with it, oh no-- a single stolen can of pop is an incident that has to be reported, annotated, filed, indexed and copied for headquarters back in Canterlot..." He massaged his temples. "you're getting the picture, I think."

Spike grinned and shook his head. "You know, Dude, you're a commanding officer... you can hire
an--- whaddyacallem, an Aide de Camp?-- to handle this stuff. Or most of it anyway." He chuckled as Flash blinked, the growing realization spreading across his face.

"That's right," he said. He thunked his noggin with a hoof. "Darn it--"

"Ehh, relax, I'll give you a hand for now," Spike said. "Can't have Twilight's Captain of the Guard drowning in a mountain of paperwork--- ironically appropriate as it would be," he added ruefully. "Let's get this stuff sorted, at least..."

Flash's expression of gratitude was radiant. "Thanks, dude, you're a real bro---"

"Don't mention it," Spike said. "Really. Can't have Twilight finding out that--- uh oh," he said. His eyes widened as a familiar muffled voice came through the thin door. "Oh crud, here comes Twilight!"

"Oh crap, what do we do??" Flash said, doing a frantic hoofy-dance in a circle with a double stack of papers balanced on his wings.

"Quick, drop it on the desk!" Flash did so. Spike tossed his armload after it. "Now stand back!" The tiny dragon took a deep breath. Flash took a hint and scurried backward. With a whoosh, Spike engulfed the overloaded rolltop desk in green flame. Flash started to yelp and grab for the sand bucket standing in the corner of the room, but the flames parted, revealing a spotless-- if slightly singed-- desk. Not a paper was left.

A knock came at the door. Spike whipped out a kerchief and wiped frantically at the sooty spots on the desk. "Captain Flash, it's me, Twilight..."

"Come in?" Flash said.

The door popped open and Twilight came trotting in, a smile on her face. "Captain, we're coming up on Westward Slope in about a half hour, I thought we might take a minute to go over the plan for Hollow Shades and--" she paused, sniffed. "Spike, I smell something burning; have you been using your flame...?"

"Uh, not really," Spike stammered, continuing to wipe and giving her a phony toothy grin. "Just burned up some wastebasket paper and stuff for Flash a second ago."

"I'm sure that the Captain appreciates the gesture, Spike," Twilight chided, "but we are on an airship; you do need to be careful where you use your fire breath."

Spike took the opportunity to look annoyed. "This thing is fireproofed seven ways from Sunday," he said. "You saw to that. We don't even use flammable gas-- they use a pegasus windbag(1) for the gasbag."

"Never you mind that," Twilight said, threatening to slide into Parental Lecture mode. "It's still better safe than sorry." Spike grumped, but didn't say anything more. She turned to Flash. "Like I was saying, we're coming up on Westward Slope, where we'll be disembarking---"

"I thought we were going to Hollow Shades?" Flash said.

Twilight sighed. He hadn't read the memo... "Yes, but the ponies in Hollow Shades are rather... reclusive. Having a Princess bomb in on them will make it much harder to deal with them. So we'll be stopping at Westward Slope, where they're having a little, um..." she pulled a notepad out of her pannier and looked at it. "Something called a Mountain Dew Festival. Hmm...." She put the notepad away. " I'll be doing a few quick hoofshake meetings, make some speeches, kiss some foals, that sort
of thing--- then we'll be slipping away during the festivities for Hollow Shades."

Something in her tone caught his attention. "We?"

"You, me, and Spike," Twilight said, as if it she were discussing a trip to the market. Flash felt a twitch of apprehension. "That's all?" he said. "I'd think you'd want... at least a few more guards or staff." He'd heard rumors about Hollow Shades; some of them were the sort of thing that could keep a pony up at night, nursing a lit candle.

Twilight shook her head. "They'd draw too much attention," she said. "Besides, we're taking my personal balloon. Not enough room for more than a handful of ponies anyway."

"Hey, don't sweat it, dude," Spike said. "Between the three of us we got..." he pointed at Flash. "A pegasus Royal Guard--" he pointed at Princess Twilight. "an Alicorn of Magic--" He jerked a thumb towards his chest smugly. "And a DRAGON. I think we can handle anything some podunk little village throws at us."

Twilight put a hoof on his shoulder and smiled. "I know your record, Flash. You're one of the finest guards in the Royal armed forces. I trust you to keep me safe."

Flash's heart gave a little hiccup at her smile. "I'll... do my best, your Highness," he said, smiling just a little. The moment was broken when Twilight dropped her hoof and consulted her notepad again. "As I was saying, we'll be going incognito... we'll be posing as a graduate students doing intern work on local folklore-- Hollow Shades does have such fascinating myths and folk tales, I have to say; I'd love to do some real research into it some time-- and Spike will pose as our assistant..."

"That's me," Spike said, amused. "Typecast forever." He shrugged. "Eh, at least I'm not posing as your DOG or anything. I have my dignity."

Twilight rolled her eyes. "Anyway, you'll obviously not be able to wear your armor," she said to Flash. "Just, um, try and dress like..."

"Casual?" Flash suggested.

"Um, yeah. Just... whatever you wear when you're on vacation, or leave, or whatever they call it," she said, waving a wing dismissively. "Though really you don't have to wear anything at all, you look good enough without--" she froze in mid sentence, face flaming, as she realized how that sounded. "I mean-- just-- just-- that is-- you would pass as--"

He took pity on her and threw her a line. "Casual. Right." He gave her a lopsided grin. "Right." Cheeks bright as cherries, she pulled her pannier off and began digging through it, not looking at him. "Oh, I found a book of the folk tales from around Hollow Shades, as well as a travelogue-- you might want to skim them, get some familiarity..." She handed him a slim volume bound in black. "Now if you'll excuse me I have to go prepare a few things, get my own... er, disguise..." she flicked a wing. "And so forth..."

She trotted out, closing the door behind her. The two males let out sighs of relief that they hadn't been aware they were holding. "Close shave with the papers," Flash muttered. His face suddenly flooded with dismay as the realization hit him fully. "Oh man, all that paperwork destroyed-- I'm going to have to start all over and--!"
Spike tapped his clawtips together and cringed. "Uhh, they weren't exactly destroyed..."

Countless miles away, Celestia sighed wearily to herself as she sat and listened to a pair of Canterlot bureaucrats--- Vertical File and Short Form, was it?--- as they went on for yet another ten minutes, slinging files and arguing back and forth over some proposal and how to implement it. She checked her cheat sheet, one of twenty: oh yes, the Petition for Comprehensive Paperwork Reduction. Short Form was for, Vertical File was against.

And quite verbose about it. "...And furthermore the rearrangement of the filing system alone will be prohibitive," he said. "And the records lost in the transitional period alone will reach the upper percentages...."

"As you have said thrice already," Short Form said, disgruntled.

"And it bears repeating! As I have always said, all in triplicate," Vertical File said pompously. "A world without proper triplicated paperwork is chaos. CHAOS I tell you..." He proceeded to meander off into what was obviously a personal favorite sermon on the virtues of extensive documentation. Celestia ground her teeth quietly and shifted in her cushion, trying to ease her aching bladder. She had reached her own decision on the matter ages ago, and would happily render it if Vertical File ever yielded the floor...

There was a faint and familiar glingle-ingle-ingle sound. Celestia's mood brightened immediately. A letter from Twilight! That would be a welcome break from the monotony; perhaps she could even plead a few minutes to read it in private--- in the little princess' room, naturally...

She looked up eagerly; here came the little purple cloud. Odd, it was looking a bit bloated and sluggish for some reason...

The puff of magical dragonsmoke almost made it to the throne. Just as it was passing above Vertical File, it ruptured, spilling what had to be fifty pounds of scrolls and papers on the luckless official's unsuspecting head. With a squawk he disappeared in a pile of snowy paper and ink.

There was a brief stunned silence. Celestia saw her opportunity and took it. "Ah, that must be Twilight's latest report," she said. "And it seems she delivered it directly to you, Vertical File. How kind of her. I'm sure you won't mind replicating all her work and sending it off to the appropriate offices, bureaus, et cetera...? Oh, in triplicate of course."

Slowly, like a groundhog reluctant to deliver its annual verdict, Vertical File's head poked out of the drifts of paper. "...Perhaps we could stand to trim down the redundancy in our record keeping just a hair..." he mumbled.

---

1) A pegasus windbag doesn't refer here to a Cloudsdale politician (though it ought to.) It refers to a bag lined with pegasus made silk that infuses the air inside with Quintessence of Air, making it lighter. Even earth ponies know how to infuse a lungful of air with Primal Essence (which is why Pinkie Pie doesn't need a gas tank for her party balloons), but pegasi were naturals at it. They perfected the art of spinning and weaving cloth into bags that continually suffused the air inside with Quintessence of Air, for a multiplicity of results including strong winds and lifting power.

2) One might argue that it persisted out of sheer surprise that Vertical File actually stopped talking.
3) In Equestria, the hairy little bugger's forecast about the length of winter actually has the weight of bureaucratic authority behind it. Their resultant unpopularity with both the Weather Bureau Pegasi (who resent the extra rush if spring comes early) AND the Earth Pony farmers (who get disgruntled if spring comes late) has made them a little gun shy about sticking their nose out of their burrows around any member of the pony tribes NOT possessing a horn.
Chapter 33

The Mountain Dew fest was rather nice actually. A lot of music, a lot of dancing, a lot of country food and copious amounts of the beverage for which the festival was named; a sparkling light lemony drink brewed from honeysuckle and dewshine flowers that grew on the mountainside. Twilight actually was motivated to secure a few barrels for the ship's stocks. A little speech-giving (which had to be shortened as nearly all of her index cards had mysteriously gone missing(1)), some hoofshaking, a little baby-kissing (that had been fun) and, at the end of the night, at the urging of her faithful #1 assistant and pressure from the crowd, some dancing with her Captain of the Guard (that had been mortifying, nerve-racking, and... maybe a little fun too?) and they had managed to slip away as the ceremonies wound down.

It was now early morning. The horizon was just starting to turn pink with the promise of dawn. The three of them— Twilights Spike, and Flash Sentry— were up on the launchdeck atop the Guiding Star's envelope, preparing to launch Twilight's little private balloon for their flight to Hollow Shades. There was a surprising amount to load, to Spike's predictable disgruntlement. "Why aren't we having the staff do this?" he asked, loading another box into the increasingly cramped basket.

"Because we're supposed to be college students on a budget, and that won't sell if we don't have to struggle to load and unload this all ourselves," Flash Sentry said factually. "Real students would stick to that."

"The fact that we're arriving in a private balloon might be a giveaway on that," Spike grumbled.

"Not really, Spike," Flash said, tossing a load of camping equipment in. "Private balloons are kind of common among pegasi, at least. Comes in handy for hauling stuff, and it's cheaper than sky chariots. Easier on the back too, since you can climb aboard and let the wind and the lifting gas do all the work. " He got a faraway look in his eye. "Used to have myself a little one-seater back in my high school days. That thing was more patches than envelope, but I loved it to death..."

"Sounds fun." Spike yawned mightily as he went over the loading checklist. "Aren't we starting out awful early?" he said. "The sun isn't even up."

"We don't want to be seen leaving, Spike," Twilight explained. "The fewer ponies know, the better. Thankfully most of the town is still sleeping in late after all the festivities last night."

"Wish I was one of 'em." Spike added another yawn.

"Wish I was one of 'em." Spike added another yawn.

"Plus, it's going to be at least a two hour flight," Twilight added.

"Two hours?" Spike said. He pointed at the looming mountain peak. "But Hollow Shades is just on the other side of that mountain!"

"Yes, but we're taking the scenic route," Twilight said. "A nice long circuitous route so that we fly into Hollow Shades from the Southeast instead of the West. Just another little thing to make it less likely anypony will connect us back to the Guiding Star and the Royal Princess Tour."

Spike rolled his eyes. "You're really getting into this whole 'undercover secret identity' thing, aren't you," he said.

Twilight leaned in till her nose was an inch from his, and gave him a smirk that clearly said 'I know
you're being a wiseass and I don't care.'

Flash Sentry chuckled as he looked over the balloon's guy ropes. "Is that your little way of telling the Princess she's overdoing it?" he said.

Spike looked at him with half-lidded eyes. "No, this is my little way of telling the Princess she's overdoing it," he said. He turned around and clapped Twilight's smirking cheeks between his hands. "Twilight, you're overdoing it."

Twilight continued to smirk. "Funny Dragon."

Flash had to smother a snort.

The town clocktower softly tolled out the half-hour. Twilight looked over and checked the time. "Um, time's getting short, we'd better change. Excuse me, boys..." she ducked around the other side of the half-deflated balloon, out of sight.

"Probably a good idea..." Flash disappeared behind a stack of crates as well.

When she came back around, her tiara, Peytonal and shoes were gone. She was wearing a large, baggy sweater with patches on the elbows, a short skirt, and a pair of large thick-rimmed spectacles, and her mane done up in a simple no-nonsense bun. Her magic compact was on a chain around her neck and she had two battered old panniers hanging on her hips. She turned about. "How do I look?"

Flash coughed and smiled. "Very cute-- aherm, in a... smart bookish college filly way, of course." Twilight's cheeks warmed a bit. "Clever. The sweater hides your wings and the skirt is long enough to cover your cutie mark."

"Yeah, it's kind of a disadvantage to undercover work when the palace makes your butt part of the royal seal," Twilight muttered. She looked over at Flash and Spike. "And... um, that's it?"

Spike looked down at himself. He was wearing his usual... nothing. "Hey, it works for me," he said.

Flash was a different story. He had left his armor back in his office this morning, obviously, but now he was wearing an enormous hiking backpack, a baggy hoofball jersey... and that was it. He shrugged. "Hey, it was what I wore in college, and the old jersey still fit, so..."

"It's a little... scruffy," Twilight complained. "And are those stains on the hem...?"

Spike and Flash looked at each other and grinned. "Hey Spike," said Flash. "What are we?"

"Men!" Spike said enthusiastically, throwing his fist in the air.

"What kind of men?"

"College men!"

"Which means we are also...?"

"TOTAL SLOBS!" The two cheered their little recital.

Twilight rolled her eyes. "Males," she said.

Flash chuckled. "To be fair, Princess," he said. "You wouldn't expect a college frat rat to be wearing anything clean-pressed and ironed, would you?"
"Okay okay okay, fine," she said, waving her hoof in defeat.

"Um, aren't you gonna carry a spear or sword or nothin' though?" Spike said, frowning. "I mean....."

"No worries about that," Flash said. "Watch." He pulled his right wing in close to his side and then thrust it out. There was a **SHING!** and a long single edged blade shot out of the wing-sleeve of his shirt, locking along the front edge of his extended wing.

"Coool," Spike breathed, reaching out with a claw to carefully tap the blade.

"I'm not about to neglect my duty to protect Princess Twilight by going out unarmed," Flash said. "But a wingblade is a little more subtle than a full suit of armor. And they're common enough among pegasi who want to exercise a little self-defense." He flexed his wing again and with a **click-clack chink** the blade disappeared under his shirt.

Twilight nodded, shuddering a bit. She'd seen Celestia's pegasi guards wearing the blades before... they'd scared poor Fluttershy half to death with them back when Celestia had visited Ponyville for tea. She sincerely hoped Flash had no reason to use them. "Good to know, I suppose," she said.

"I also brought a crossbow." He tapped it where it hung by a strap from the side of his backpack, next to a quiver of bolts. "Because nothing says 'stay away' like a tool that can poke holes in a pony way over there. I also stuffed a few odds and ends in that might come in handy... depending."

Twilight nodded absently. She looked into the basket, then double-checked her checklist, then checked the basket again. "Wait, we're missing some things," she said. "Crate 1-5 of my equipment... and panniers A, B, and D...."

"Uh, no we're not," Flash said. He dusted himself off a bit and looked apologetic. "Sorry, your highness, but most of that stuff was a bit high end for a college intern to be lugging about. Some of that equipment, your hypothetical college professor would have had a half-dozen heart attacks if he knew an intern had her hooves on it..."

"But--- but--!" she protested.

"There wasn't anything in that equipment that you couldn't do with your little field kit, was there?" he pointed to a small case tucked in one corner. "For alicorn detecting, or the like."

"No, but using that thing is like replacing a full toolbox with a Swiss Army knife! The degree of precision in the measurements and statistical..." she sputtered, half pleading. Flash just kept his face impassive. She sighed and gave in. A few hairs sprang out of place. Working in the field with nothing but a field kit; what had she sunk to? "Right, right..." she looked at her list and, with an expression almost of pain, scratched several items off. "Okay, then I guess we can move on to a quick review of our itinerary for our arrival. Once we arrive at Hollow Shades, we'll check our reservations at the local hotel I had you place and--- what?"

Flash Sentry was shaking his head. "Uh, I didn't let Spike place them, Highness," he said.

A hair sprung loose on Twilight's mane, but she maintained control. "What do you mean you didn't let him place reservations at the Hollow Shades hotel?" she said. "I specifically put it on your schedule for that day to make sure to mail a---"

"A reservation? From our blimp? On royal stationery? From the household staff and guard service of the Princess of Friendship?" Spike said, sitting on the rail of the balloon basket with his arms crossed.

Twilight raised a hoof to rant, and wilted. "But...but where will we stay once we arrive? What if
they're booked full and don't have any spare rooms? I don't know of any other hotels or inns at Hollow Shades—"

Flash seemed infuriatingly unperturbed. "Then that's what the tents are for," he said, pointing to two canvas rolls in the bottom of the balloon basket.

"Tents??" Twilight said.

Flash looked at her curiously. "Didn't you ever go on any field trips or expeditions while you were going through college...?"

"Of course I did! Princess Celestia took Spike and me out on them all the time! We never went anywhere that we didn't book accommodations in advance--- we PREPARED!"

"Ah, yeah. You might find that going on a field trip as a normal college student is a little different than going on the same trip with the ruler of all Equestria as your bunkmate," Flash said, shaking his head in amusement. "Look, Highness, college students generally fly by the seat of their pants..."

"They what?" Spike said in bafflement.

Flash shrugged. "Pegasus saying. Anyway, they have to improvise, especially on a road trip. They can't usually GET reservations--- for hotel rooms, restaurants, or anything else--- because they can't afford them in the first place. So they'll hit a youth hostel. Or camp out on the road side, or sleep in their wagon, or crash on a friend or relatives' couch, or even sleep in someone's barn for a few bits a night. If we want to maintain this cover, we're not going to have a royal expense account, or a palace staff to 'smooth over' any difficulties getting a room." He gave her a cockeyed grin. "Afraid things aren't going to be nearly as pampered as you're used to."

Twilight scowled at her Captain of the Guard imperiously. She wouldn't have bothered if she'd known he thought her pooched lower lip just made her look cute. "I am not pampered."

Flash just cocked an eyebrow.

"I am not!" She gave Spike an uncertain look. "I'm not, am I?"

"You've been Celestia's student since the day I was hatched, you've got a live-in dragon assistant, a Royal stipend, your first home was in the palace, your second was an observatory tower paid for by the Princess, and the third was a library the size of a mansion...." he said. "So kinda, yeah."

Twilight pouted.

"Well... " Flash averred, "Let's just say you haven't had any real reason to live spartan."

Twilight pouted, and regarded her old balloon. He'd done a lot of things to it that at the time had mystified her, but in retrospect made an embarrassing amount of sense. First off, At Flash Sentry's insistence, they had disabled the magic propulsion runes and strapped an engine on the side of the basket: a clunky, secondhand propeller and engine, similar to the one that Tank the Tortoise wore, if a few sizes larger, and equipped with a rudder sail for steering. He'd then, over her loud protestations, actually torn the balloon in several places and crudely patched them back over by hoof himself, with thread and needle and cheap canvas. He'd even added a few scuffs and stains here and there to make it look more worn. It had never dawned on her that a "little private balloon" in royal purple silk and equipped with royally monogrammed runic controls might be less than subtle. Now, though, the balloon would easily pass as the sort of battered used vehicle a couple of college interns would be using to putter about. Attention to detail, Twilight thought with chagrin. She hated to admit it, but for all her obsessive compulsive pickiness, Flash Sentry had been spotting a lot of details to
this little mission she'd overlooked.

He shrugged the backpack off and tossed it in the basket. "Come on, your Highness-- it'll be good for our cover. Nothing says 'authentic college student' like having to rough it because we're low on dough. Besides, it might be fun." He gave her a cockeyed grin.

She felt her mood thaw at his smile. Or perhaps go soft and gooey like warm caramel. She silenced her inner panicking pony as best she could, smoothing her mane down with a hoof. "All right, then," she sighed. "But so far as having a cover goes, you'd better get in the habit of calling me 'Twilight' and not 'Princess' or 'Highness.' "

"Understood your Hi-- ahem. Twilight." Flash hopped aboard the basket and, ever the gentlestallion, offered a hoof to help Twilight aboard. With a curtsy, she climbed in.

The lines were cast off, and they gracefully ascended from the Guiding Star's upper launchpad. Silently they rose, quiet as a lingering dream above the sleeping town. In minutes they were above the clouds and turning with the guiding wind.

Only once they were above the cloudline, and unlikely to disturb anyone, did Twilight start the engine. With a rumble and a buzz it came to life, slowly but surely sending them on their way. "Did you read those books I gave you?" Twilight asked Flash.

Flash grimaced. "Yeah. Sure didn't get much sleep last night. Those legends about Hollow Shades are enough to make a pony's mane stand on end. And the travelogue was almost as scary as the folklore!" He coughed. "Prin-- er, Twilight. I feel like it's my duty to ask." His brow furrowed. "Are you sure you want to be poking around Creepyville Central looking for alicorns?"

Spike heard this and looked perturbed. "Excuse me?...Creepyville? Hello?"

Twilight made a moue of annoyance as she set the balloon's course. "Flash, Alicorns, nascents and the like are going to tuck themselves away in hidden away locations. And it doesn't get any more hidden away than the most reclusive village in Equestria."

"Most reclusive, and most haunted, according to the travelogue you gave me," Flash said. "This town is in the middle of the Gothic Forest. Not next to, not on the edge, in the middle. Speaking for myself, were I an alicorn, I sure wouldn't choose that place to live. It's like the setting of half the horror novels in the Equestria Daily book-of-the-month club!"

"...Horror novels? Hello?" Spike tried to interject.

Twilight finally heard him and sighed. "Spike, Hollow Shades is just a quiet, sleepy, sheltered little town in the middle of a really old forest."

"And Ponyville's just a farming community," Spike snarked, "on the edge of the Everfree."

Twilight's nose scrunched. "Fine, so it is featured on the list of Equestria's ten most possibly Eldritch regions--"

"Number four," Flash muttered, reading off the back of the travelogue. "Right after Scariest Cave in Equestria and ahead of the Everfree Forest."

"---But you have to remember, Spike, all the ghost stories and creepy tales coming out of the place are just that, stories and tales."
Spike just stared at her. Unblinking. "Gimme the book."

Twilight cocked an eyebrow. "I really don't think it's a good idea for a baby dragon--"

"I'm fourteen--"

"To be filling his head with scary stories. They'll mess up your sleep AND prejudice you against---"

"I wanna know what you're getting us into. Gimme the book."

"They're just old mare's tales, Spike!"

The stare under his beetling brows grew more intense. "Don't make me say it, Twi."

Twilight huffed. "Spike---"

"Nightmare Moon, Twilight." He held out a hand and made 'gimme' motions. "The book, please."

"Fine. On your own head be it..." With a roll of her eyes, Twilight levitated the book of folklore and the travelogue over to the waiting dragon, who promptly sat down in a corner of the basket and began reading, his eyes slitted with grim determination.

By the time they meandered around the Dewshine Mountain, his slitted eyes were as round as saucers.

It was easy to tell when they began to fly over the valley of Hollow Shades. There was an almost tangible change to the atmosphere; almost a flavor in the air, of deep forests and the onset of dusk. The sun, despite it being nearly noon, faded behind a curtain of clouds, and the ground below grew dark, blanketed with conifers whose steeple-like crowns pierced upwards below them, some of them almost brushing the bottom of the basket. It took one a few moments to realize that no, the balloon had not dropped in altitude; the dark evergreen trees below truly did reach that high...

It was a vast, wide valley, a bowl ringed by mountain peaks, covered in a blanket of trees, the uniform green broken only by a single lake that split up the center of the valley like a massive wound. A few inlets could be seen; frothing white as they tumbled from the trees down into the placid waters below, but no outlet could be perceived. Even from over a thousand feet in the air, it was obvious that the waters were dark, and deep, and cold.

They floated in over the lake toward the harbor at its northernmost tip. Twilight was looking through the travelogue and reading aloud, to refresh all their memories. Flash Sentry was looking worried and going over his weapons and supplies. Spike was looking like a train wreck victim, huddling in a ball in one corner and clutching the unfortunate folklore book to himself like a shield.

"...Due to climate and topological anomalies, the Hollow Shades valley experiences very little annual sunshine," Twilight was reading aloud. "Most of which is absorbed by the unbroken forest of sequoia and other evergreens that cover the valley from mountain slope to mountain slope. The Valley is divided from its southernmost end to 2/3 of the way to the North by Rally Lake..."

"The proper pronunciation is R'lyeh," Spike muttered.

"The lake, though entirely landlocked, remains perpetually fresh; it is believed that there is an underground river serving as an outlet down in the as-yet unfathomed depths of the lake."
"An explorer tried to find the bottom with a diving bell," Spike muttered, staring ahead. " Reached nearly a thousand feet. When they pulled the line up on the fourth time, they say there were teeth embedded in the end of the rope..."

"The town itself extends from the harbor and winds up among the trees, deep into the forest itself--"

"Where the sunlight never shines..."

"And is actually a scattered collection of houses, settlements, small farms, and manors, old, new and long abandoned---"

"Translation: HAUNTED..."

"AHEM." Twilight glared briefly at Spike, and continued. "The flora and fauna of the region are little studied, though many of the townsfolk can give the traveler sufficient advice--"

"Like the warning 'Turn Back'?” Spike suggested.

"-- and visitors new to the region are cautioned to not wander off into the deep forest, as there are reports of dangerous creatures..."

"Zombies, vampires, ghouls---"

"SPIKE! The only thing they've confirmed there are things like timberwolves, snakes, star spiders..."

"Oh yeah, I like the bits about spiders. Like how they’ve gone into the deep woods and spotted spiders the size of a pony face." He looked at her. "Excuse me. The size of a SCREAMING pony face--"

Twilight's eyebrows tabled. "This is your own fault for reading that book of folklore."

He waved it at her. "You mean the book of folklore you made your bodyguard read?" Spike snapped. "Don't jerk my chain, Twilight. We're going out looking for wild alicorns. Chasing myths and legends. You know what kind of myths and legends Hollow Shades has? The kind that ponies think are scarier than the Everfree Forest." He flipped open the book and showed her a picture of something extremely gruesome looking that was in the process of doing something extremely gruesome looking. "I'm inclined to agree with them! They've got a story here about some pony getting eaten by a tree, Twilight. A TREE!"

Twilight closed the travelogue and gave him a patient look. "Spike, I know you're worried. And frankly I'm kind of glad-- this can be a risky adventure we're going on; it was enough to make Princess Celestia worry. But you can't let your fears control you. Remember, the Everfree is scary, but it did turn out to be a lot less dangerous than everypony thought. We're in and out of there all the time, aren't we? I even go and visit Zecora there once a week now!"

"And it's still dangerous," Spike scowled. He'd never liked the fact that Twilight and her friends had gotten so casual about traipsing into the Everfree, Zecora or no.

"Exactly," she said, rubbing his headspikes with her hoof. "But we know enough to keep a level head, don't we? That's what we need to do here: keep a balanced perspective." She tucked her travelogue away and turned back to the helm. "Now come on, you two; get ready. I'm going to bring us in for a landing."

Spike grumbled and turned to pick up his backpack. Flash nudged him. "Psst.. Here," Flash said, setting his oversized hiker's bag next to Spike. "Check this out; it'll make you feel better."
Curious, Spike looked over. Flash began going through his gear, opening pockets and unzipping sleeves to show him things. He pulled out one of his crossbow bolts and handed it to the dragonling. "Check it. The shafts are pressed from a mix of oak, holly and flying rowan wood." He tapped the tip; it was tri-bladed, and made of two different metals. "Silver, iron--"

"Cold Iron?" Spike said knowingly.

"SKY iron," Flash said. "Shooting star metal, from Luna herself." He took the bolt back and slipped it into a slotted box, and attached the box to the crossbow. Spike could now see that the crossbow had two steel bows, over and under. "Single shot or Rapid fire. Wind up the lower bow, and it cocks and shoots the upper one as long as you hold the trigger and there's a bolt in the cartridge. Anything gets within twenty feet of us, it's gonna be a pincushion."

"Yikes. Sweet, but yikes." Spike tapped the bow with a claw tip.

Flash slung it back in place on the side of his backpack. He pulled out a bundle of stakes and a hammer.

"Tent stakes?"

"That too. But they're solid oak, and nice and sharp." Flash took one, and slotted the flat end into a groove on the head of the hammer. "And now, it's a bad case of vampire heartburn." He gave a short swing, indicating how the spike-hammer could be used.

Spike chuckled, then sniffed, his nose wrinkling. "Well, you're sure thorough; it smells like you soaked 'em in garlic."

"And a few other things." He stowed the vampire stakes and hammer away, and pulled out a paper bag. "Garlic, rosemary, onion, sage, sea salt--" he shrugged. "It's amazing how many cooking spices and herbs have monster-repelling powers." He handed the bag over to Spike. "I've made some satchels, but since you're going to be camp cook..."

Spike gave the contents of the bag a look. "Maybe I shoulda just brought a hand-cannon loaded with my marinara sauce," he said, cocking an eyebrow wryly.

Flash laughed. "Well I hope you get my point," he said. "I got a look at those books and I loaded for Ursa Major. I've got stuff for werewolves, vampires, zombies, ghouls, ghosts, ghasts, changelings, timberwolves, twittermites...."

"That why the pack so big?" Spike said.

"Posted a note to keep one on the Guiding Star at all times," Flash said with a smirk. "I'm hoping to talk the Guard into having one with every troop. Once they're field tested anyway." He shrugged. "Point I'm making is, you don't need to worry. This isn't some horror flick and we're not three dumb teenagers walking into a haunted mansion with nothing but a beer keg and three brain cells between us, splitting up the party and chasing the boogeymare armed with nothing but a flashlight." Spike snickered at that one. "We're veterans, okay? Armed to the teeth and crazy prepared as Princess Twilight and I could get us. I'm a royal guardsman, Twilight is the Alicorn of Magic...

"And you, well you're our ace in the hole."

"How do you figure that?"

"Did you forget what you said yourself yesterday?" Flash gave him a playful jab in the shoulder. "You're a dragon. You're magic resistant, tough as nails and most importantly, you breathe FIRE."
Heat and light and flame, anything I've ever heard of is vulnerable to those. In your own way you're the baddest little dude in the valley."

"Heh. Yeah. Yeah!" Spike perked up. Then he looked a little sheepish. "I, uh. I kind of forget sometimes."

"It's okay; sometimes you have stop and remember to be brave." Flash's voice got serious. "I'll tell you though, I'm glad you're along. If there's anything out there that can get through all this stuff, even if it's everything in that book of boogey-monsters, your claws and fire will stop it cold. So I'm counting on you to help me watch Princess Twilight's back, okay?"

"As if there was ever any doubt," Spike said. He held out his fist for a hoof-bump; Flash gave it readily.

"Do me a favor, huh?" Flash said. "write up a quick inventory of the stuff in there. Most of it was a quick stuff-and-grab last night..."

Spike saluted. "You got it," he said. He pulled a quill and parchment out of his own pack and sat down to catalog the content.

"Coming up on the pier," Twilight said. "Get ready to cast off the lines."

"Aye aye," Flash said. He took up the anchor lines and stood next to her.

Twilight looked over at him as she steered the balloon. "Thank you for that," she said to him under her breath.

"Heard that, did you?" Flash muttered back.

"It's a gondola, not a flying yacht," she said. "I was standing three feet away. Anyway, thank you for humoring him."

"...Humoring him?" Flash gave her a double-take.

"I know he gets wound up in comic books and pulp novels and he lets his imagination run away with him, so showing him all that 'monster hunting gear,' " she made quote-marks in the air with her hooves, "helped him calm down..."

Flash cocked an eyebrow. "Prin-- Twilight," he said, "I wasn't humoring him."

Twilight gave him her own double-take. "You can't mean... you don't honestly think all the legends about this place are true, too?" she said in disbelief.

Flash's expression didn't change. "No, but I don't know which ones ARE," he said. "So I prepared accordingly."

"Which means you grabbed everything you thought you could use to smack a monster in the mush and stuffed it in my balloon," Twilight groused. "Is that the real reason you dumped my equipment overboard? To make room for all this superstitious monster-under-the-bed stuff?"

Flash's eyebrows dropped into a scowl. "Have you forgotten the warning Princess Celestia herself gave before we left?" he said. "She all but admitted that even she avoids this place because of the stories that come out of it. And she's the Alicorn of the Sun!"

"That hardly means that we're going to be fending off vampires or zomponies or-or-or the latest
Equestria Studios creature feature!" she snapped, inexplicably irritated.

"Well, I have to agree with Spike on this one," he retorted. He pulled out the crossbow. "And you know the nice thing about monster-killing rapid fire crossbows?"

"What?"

"They'll punch holes in normal things, too." He smirked and cocked it once. *Ch-chak!*

Twilight just looked at him. "This is a stallion thing, isn't it? One of those stallion things I keep hearing about."

"Just doing my job, Princess," he answered.

"Ugh, between the two of you I'm going to go absolutely spare, aren't I..." she continued to natter as the balloon slowly dropped below the treeline. The already dim and overcast day grew darker as the leviathan trees rose around them, blotting out more and more of the sky. It was noon, but soon it looked almost like dusk. The boughs reached around them, closed overhead, till it seemed they were flying down the mouth of a cave, a cave floored in lakewater and roofed in twilit green.

Slowly the harbor came into view; a tiny wooden jetty sticking out into the water, so small against the vastness of the lake it looked like a handful of matchstick buildings. There was a platform for landing balloons-- which only made sense, as it was one of the few ways in and out of Hollow Shades. Lights were burning to guide any travelers in.

The threesome was muted by the stillness around them. Twilight shut off the pusher motor and let the balloon glide in. They floated over the few rowboats at the dock and landed with a soft bump on an open space on the landing pad. As Flash and Spike hustled to tie the balloon down, a pony came out of the nearby tin shack and shuffled in their direction, carrying a lantern. "Kin ah help ye?" He mumbled.

Twilight looked him over. He was a dark blue-gray pony with a mane so dark green as to be almost black. He had a droopy pencil thin mustache and goatee. In fact everything seemed to droop about him; his mane, his ears, his limpid, watery eyes. Even his clothes seemed to droop; his sou'wester hat and fisher-pony's coveralls, his enormous mackinaw raincoat, all seemed to hang on him like he was perpetually drenched. Even though his lantern was guttering and dim, he squinted against the light.

Twilight nervously sprang into her rehearsed speech. "Ah, yes, I'm Twilight Twinkle from Canterlot University? And this is Flash and, er, Spike... We're doing a study on the legends and folklore of the region?"

The droopy fellow looked at her, apparently ruminating what she had said. "Gon' be stayin' a while, then?" His tone said 'your funeral' as clearly as the words would have.

"Er, yes. A week or two at least." Behind her, Spike and Flash continued strapping on as many bags as they could carry.

He ruminated some more. "Better git on up to the Inn," he said, pointing inland and uphill. Windows and lantern light could be seen through the trees, under the silhouettes of shingled rooftops. "Rain comin' soon."

"Really?" Flash blurted out, looking up at the barely-visible sky. "How can you tell?"

"'Salways a rain comin' soon, this time o' year." Almost on cue, a few drops pattered down. He looked them over. "I'll stow yer balloon, 'n have someone haul the rest of yer stuff on up." He held
out a hoof.

"What? Oh, ah, thank you!" Twilight shook his hoof cheerfully. "Very kind of you, Mister...?"

"...Angler." The pony looked at his still-empty hoof, bemused.

"Well, thank you Mr. Angler. Come on, you two, we've got a room waiting for us!... I hope," she said. She hitched her backpack and panniers up and started trotting up the winding path into the town.

Behind her, Flash rolled his eyes and hoofed the dockmaster a short stack of bits. He and Spike hustled to catch up, looking to dodge a few raindrops. Mr. Angler, his expression unchanged, tucked the bits in his pockets. "Young Feller? Spike?"

Spike stopped. "Er, yes?"

Angler nodded briefly. "Be careful. Don't go out after dark."

Spike gulped at the ominous warning. "Heh. Looks like it's always dark around here," he tried to joke.

Angler considered his words and nodded seriously. "That it is, young feller."

Spike wilted and most emphatically did NOT feel spiders jitter up his back-spines. He decided to can any snappy rejoinders for later. He spun on one heel and galloped after Flash and Twilight as fast as his stubby legs would go.

Angler watched the trio trot up the crooked trail as the rain began to patter down in earnest. His photophores glowed briefly; there were splashes in the water, and his help began shuffling up the dock to unload the strangers' balloon. He scratched at his gill ridges under his collar with his free hoof.

"Eh, tourists," he said.

1)Spike had been in charge of her spare book bag and while we shan't say she smelled a rat, she did smell smoke)

2)There were many levels of Stare in Equestria, including serpent, dragon, basilisk and Fluttershy. A baby dragon wasn't about to turn anyone to stone, but if he wanted you to know he was Staring at you, you darned well knew it.
Thunder cracked and rolled outside the windows, and rain poured down in buckets. It looked to be a long stormy day in Hollow Shades, at least as far as one could see from the front desk of the Hollow Shades Inn. A few of the regulars were in the drawing room, gathered around the fireplace, when the front door crashed open and in staggered a bookish-looking unicorn mare, loaded down with saddlebags and backpack and as drenched as if she’d been dunked in a bathtub. She tottered up to the front desk, sputtering, and leaned against the counter. "Good NIGHT, it wasn't even a drizzle when we were at the bottom of the HILL-- please, oh PLEASE tell me you have rooms available, I do NOT want to try and set up a rustic campsite by the roadside in THIS!" she said, looking up at the mare behind the counter through waterlogged spectacles.

The dark brown earth filly watching the front desk nodded warily, and quietly slipped her hoof off the silver-loaded crossbow next to her. One just didn't burst in the front door like that, not in Hollow Shades. "How many in your party?" she said, trying to slow her heartbeat.

The door crashed open again, and in staggered two more figures; a lanky pegasus with a blue mane, and a short pudgy reptile. Both were carrying small mountains of camping gear and both were just as drenched as the mare at the counter. "Good NIGHT," the dragonling said, spewing water. "Where did THAT come from?"

"Yeah, are the weather squads asleep or something?" the pegasus demanded. He dropped his bags in a heap on the floor and shook off as discreetly as he could.

"That'll be three of us," Twilight said to the clerk. "We'll be staying for about a week, at least, but we'll go ahead and pay for two weeks in advance--" she slid a bag of bits across the counter.

One of the ponies huddled round the fire answered Flash's question. "No weather patrol 'round here," he said curtly.

Flash looked surprised. "None whatsoever?"

The pony looked up from the fire. He was a scruffy fellow in a bulky plaid coat with a bright red, shaggy beard that consumed half his face. A flop-eared hat dried on a stool in front of him, and an axe with an onyx-black head leaned against the arm of his chair. "What we get, we get from the forest," he said. He harrumphed, amused. "Just like everything else around here." He patted his axe.

Flash finished shaking off and moved over to the fire, Spike-- ever the heat-loving lizard-- right behind him. Flash sat down next to the plaid-wearing pony while Spike got as close to the hearth as possible. "Flash, Canterlot University Folklore and Mythology department," he said, sticking a hoof out.

"Woodcutter," the grizzled pony said, shaking it. "Timberjack."

"Timberjack?" Flash said, his brow furrowing. "Don't you mean 'lumberjack'? "

"Well that too, but mostly Timberjack," Woodcutter said.

"What's the difference?" Spike said from his seat near the coals.
"OoowwwwoooOOOO00000000...."

There was a flash of lightning. A long, low howl, rough with moss and bark, sounded out somewhere in the stormy dark.

"--whaarrrgggharrbble."

And terminated on a rather odd gargling noise. Flash and Spike half rose to their feet; nopony else in the room even twitched. "Sounds like you got another crop comin' in, Woodcutter," somepony said with a dry chortle.

Woodcutter gave Flash a humorless grin. "Difference is Timberjackin' is a little more excitin' than lumberjackin','" he said. "Got us a lot of timberwolves out there. They're a menace, but they make good firewood--- oncet you whack 'em good with a black iron blade." He patted his axe again. There was another flash of lightning and a rumble of thunder.

"Oooowwwooo0000000000.....wharrrghgarrble."

"What the heck is that noise they're making?" Spike said, alarmed.

Woodcutter idly examined the edge of his axe. "Yer average timberwolf ain't too bright," he explained. "They try an' look up to howl at the lightning, but they forget that it's pourin' down buckets." He paused. "Hain't found any drowned that way yet, but give it time."

"Wharrrghgarblle. Cough, hack."

Spike's eyebrows tabled. "You gotta be kidding me." The bundle in his claws cheeped.

Flash leaned forward, curious. "Whatcha got there?"

Spike held up the bundle. A tousled, half-grown phoenix chick sat in the middle of the rough towel. It peeped cheerfully. "Oowlowiscious is off doin' his own thing out there, but I brought Peewee in. Phoenixes don't care for damp weather too much."

There was a sound that went around the room, among the old fogeys and bypassers who had stopped in out of the weather. An "oohhh" of recognition, as the phoenix chick made his appearance. Every pony in the drawing room seemed to lean in towards its glow. "Ooh, that's a good sign there, youngun!" an oldster with a trailing white beard said, nodding. "A phoenix chick. Powerful ward against evil, an' things o' the dark. Yer a lucky feller t' have one as a pet..."

The mare at the counter saw Spike cradling Peewee. She brightened so suddenly she seemed to almost become buoyant. "Oh, my! You're keeping a phoenix chick with you? I had no idea! If he shares the room with you we'll cut your bill in half-- we'll even waive the fire hazard deposit..."

Twilight blinked. "Why, that's-- very generous of you," she said, surprised. "Is there any reason...?"

The counter filly's eyes moved briefly to the dark and rain-streaked windows. "Ma'am, anypony in Hollow Shades would be more than happy to have one of Celestia's sun-birds under their roof," she said. "Our inn would have to be run by fools not to make you feel welcome." She hastily went back to counting out the bits and writing the bill. She hoofed Twilight a heavy pewter key. "Room 202, second floor, first door on the right," she said, pointing up the stairs. "Watch your step, the stairwell's not well lit."

"I suppose not," Twilight murmured to herself, looking about. The entire hotel seemed to be a bit under equipped on lighting. Even with the roaring fireplace, chandeliers laden with candles hanging
low, and wreath-wrapped candlesticks at every window, the old hotel still stubbornly clung to its dark shadowy gloom like an old nag clutching at her shawl. The only place free of gloom seemed to be the little space around the hearth, lit by Peewee's glow.

Ah, at least they're making friends with the locals, she thought to herself. She turned her attention back to the mare at the front desk. "Excuse me miss," she said, "We are going to be doing a good deal of looking around Hollow Shades. You wouldn't happen to have any tour guides or travel brochures or... aheh... well anything like that?" She tapered off awkwardly as she realized just how unlikely they were to have such things. But it was a hotel, after all, shouldn't that count for something?

To her relief the counter girl pointed to a wire rack standing nearby. "Oh, thank you," Twilight said, relieved at escaping a faux pas. She collected one of everything, including a town map. There wasn't much and it was covered in a disturbing layer of dust and cobwebs, but it was better than nothing.

She trotted over to where Spike, Flash and Peewee were holding court, and gave Flash a tap on the shoulder. "Got the room key, we might as well go on up," she said, indicating the window. The torrential downpour had let up slightly, but rain still came down steadily. "Oh, miss? The harbor keeper will be sending up the rest of our baggage later. Could you have it sent to our room when it arrives?"

"...Oh. Mister Angler's help is... coming up here?" the counter filly said faintly. She did not sound at all enthused. "...I mean... of course...as soon as it gets here..." she gave Twilight a weak smile.

"Excellent, thank you."

Flash shrugged to Spike and picked up his luggage. "Lead on, Princess," he said--- and the three of them froze. All three of them struggled to keep their poker face. Cringing inwardly Twilight kept going, not looking back.... maybe they hadn't heard?

One of the greybeards chuckled to Flash. "One o' those kind, eh?" he said, nodding at the departing mare with a knowing wink to Flash.

"Heh. Don't let her hear you say that," Spike chuckled nervously.

"--Just a nickname we tease her with," Flash said, flushing and trying to look amused. "She's not that bad..."

"Excuse me?"

The two males flinched for real this time at the tone in Twilight's voice. "Nothing, nothing!" They grabbed their things and hustled to the staircase, the chuckles of the oldsters following after.

Flash was about three steps up when one of the natives warming his hooves by the fire cleared his throat. Flash paused and looked back.

"You be sure and lock your shutters tight tonight, y'hear?" the rumple-jacketed pony said. "Hollow Shades, 'tain't no place to leave no windows open."

The look in his baggy eye was one Flash hadn't seen since field training... when drill sergeant casually told him to be sure and check his sleeping bag for scorpions before climbing into it. He swallowed the sudden lump in his throat. "Sure thing," he said. He gave the old stallion a half-grin and trotted up the stairs after Twilight and Spike.
Spike sighed. "I hope they quit when the thunder stops, or that's gonna get annoying real fast." He grunted and shut the window.

The quarters they were in were fairly nice, if a bit on the gothic side. Everything was made of thick cut timbers and trimmed with wrought iron, and built solid as the trees from which the timbers came. There were two heavy, four-poster beds, a large fireplace and a large desk and table. The room was lit by old fashioned iron lamps—old fashioned, even by Equestrian standards; they used actual wicks and oil, rather than caged glowbugs— that hung from the exposed beams in the low ceiling. Both windowsills had candlesticks as well, still unlit and looped by garlands of dried flowers and herbs. The windows were made of heavy leaded glass, too rippled and bubbled to see through clearly... not that it mattered; nopony could see anything outside anyway. Between the storm and the perpetual gloom of the forest, it was nearly as black as midnight outside.

Despite having few furnishings there were little touches here and there, tiny touches that showed the place had been built with a craftsman's care; carvings on the bare wooden beams, a touch of fancy ironwork on the window shutters and doors and around the fireplace.... though as for that, the subject of the artwork had an effect far less than homey and far more unsettling; odd, leering faces, strange symbols and cavorting, skulking, slinking animals that one could not quite identify.

Since the rain outside was keeping them shut in, Twilight had decided that time would be best spent setting up their temporary headquarters. A little wheedling and a few spare bits hoofed to the inn's staff(1) and a few extra tables and a set of shelves had been hastily shuffled to the room from other quarters. The rest of their luggage arrived, borne by ponies wrapped in lumpy hats and mackinaws who said nothing as they shuffled the trunks and cases into place, took their tip and hunched their way down the stairs. In short order Twilight had the shelves stacked with portable thaumaturgical gear, and the walls and table festooned with papers, photos, leaflets, and diagrams.

Flash had been busy in other ways. The moment they had arrived at the room he had surprised both Twilight and Spike by pushing past them and entering first. Twilight had almost barked at him for being rude. Before she could get out a brief "Ut--?" He'd dropped his backpack in the doorway and proceeded to sweep the room.

The change from his easygoing, loose-limbed air from downstairs had been startling. He'd swung in around the door frame, scanning every corner of the room with his left flank to the wall, then checked the wardrobe, the water closet, even under the bed with a speed and professionalism that surprised her. He'd finished his quick search of the room and said "It's clear, Princess," pulling his camping bag out of the doorway and flinging it on one of the beds as if nothing had happened. "Dibs!"

Even now he was poking around the room, idly examining the windows, walls, furniture, even the floors and ceiling, poking at metal scrollwork around the windows and the engravings in the beams and posts. "It kind of dawns on me to ask," he said as he scrutinized the carvings in one of the bedposts, "Um, isn't our cover a lot thinner than it should be? I mean....a purple unicorn traveling with a purple dragon....considering everything, won't somepony put two and two together?"

Instead of answering, Spike and Twilight shared a look and started snickering.

"Was it something I said?" Flash said.

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" Spike said. "About us being conspicuous, that is."
"Well, ponies with dragon companions are actually more common than you'd think. (3) Plus you're forgetting one of the first rules about alicorns," Twilight said. "Or at least alicorn magic. Unless you're looking for us, or looking right at us, If we don't want to be noticed, we aren't." Twilight twiddled with one of the magical dinguses in her workplace and smiled at Flash.

Flash "aahed" and nodded. "The Somepony Else's Problem field. I read that memo..." he paused at her gimlet stare. "Okay, I skimmed it."

"Anyway, you know the gist of it," Spike said. "All alicorns do it distinctively."

"Instinctively," Twilight corrected. "There are a lot of rules and exceptions, and it's not a one hundred percent thing... and it has a chance of rebounding if you push it too hard. But alicorns have an aura that makes ponies forget that they saw them a moment after looking away. Or, well, not exactly forget," she amended, waving a hoof as she fished for the words. "More like forget that they wanted to remember."

"It makes them slide right out of your short-term memory," Flash suggested.

Twilight tapped her nose. "Exactly. Celestia tells me that she and Luna had one over themselves for most of their fillyhood," Twilight said. "They think it's like a protective adaptation for young alicorns. It certainly kept them safe during Discord's reign. In their case they've really refined it over the centuries, too."

"Just ask Celestia about her collection of fake mustaches and beards sometime," Spike deadpanned.

"I'd... rather not," Flash said. "So... moving on from the magical see-me-not stuff... what leads you to think there's an alicorn or nascent here to be found, Twilight? I know it was my suggestion, but I was only working off one of my hunches at the museum. You sort of seized on it with a lot more enthusiasm than I expected."

Twilight smiled and half-shrugged. "Well, setting aside all the in depth detailed geographical and thaumaturgical data and analyses..." Twilight began.

"And the audience thanks you--" Spike interjected.

Twilight stuck her tongue out at him. "-- it boils down to the fact that this area is, well, a statistical anomaly," she continued. She poked at some charts taped to the wall, and a detailed map of the continent. "This valley is one of the biggest thaumatic turbulence zones in Equestria, next to the Everfree Forest and two or three other areas. Mana flows here are especially turbulent, and the natural geography tangles up the ley lines here something fierce. Researchers used to believe they were remainders of Discord's reign, but Celestia and Luna recently confirmed(2) that they predate even Discord."

"If I was a big shiny magick-y Alicorn, I'd want to hid in a place like that," Spike agreed.

"It's more than just that," Twilight said. "First, this place is a source for an almost endless river of superstition, folklore, bizarre happenings, weird encounters and outright horror stories than Ooky Spooky Writer Con '85. It's never been officially surveyed but there have been sightings of pretty much every monster that exists and a few that don't. If you believed half the tales, this place should be more dangerous and uninhabitable than Ghastly Gorge.

"Second, besides getting here by balloon or by, as far as I can tell, one unmaintained, zig-zaggy perilous one-pony trail over the mountains, there's no connection with the outside world. Farmland consists of little one or two acre plots they hack out of the hillsides up above the forest line, a few
herds of sheep.... Despite having a dock, they don't seem to have any fishing.... This place should be impoverished.

"In fact you'd think it was impoverished, going by the failure rate around here."

"Failure rate?" Spike said.

"Yes. There's a couple of small factories out here, a college, a hospital, an insane asylum-- though I think a couple of those last few are the same building-- A housing project, a military fort, a scattering of farms and frontier style settlements, at least a couple of mansions..." Twilight poked at pins on her map as she spoke.

"Big valley," Flash commented.

"But all of the above are shut down, dying out, abandoned or near-abandoned," Twilight continued.

"So.... something here is running them off?" Spike said ominously. "Or... making sure they never leave...."

Twilight shrugged. "There's a much simpler explanation, Spike," she said. "It's easy enough to figure out. Ponies hear about how undeveloped this area is, how cheap the land is, and figure they've found the deal of the century. They come out here and start their businesses or farms or whatever and then find out there's no infrastructure to sustain them, not even a rail line or even a decent road. So their little enterprise fizzles out.

"Same story with the rich ponies and their mansions. They think this is a great place to get away from it all, then they find out that there's nothing here at all to get away TO." She looked out the drizzly window. "Let's face it, this place isn't exactly Rio de Ja-Mare-o." Thunder boomed. "So they get bored, leave and never come back."

"Spike! Rein it in," Twilight snapped. Spike crossed his arms and glared at her defiantly.

"Ugh," Twilight said, rolling her eyes. "Spike's drama aside, it's bizarre. Everything that comes out here dies off..."

"Could you please not phrase it that way?" Spike pleaded.

"Yet... here we are." She gestured around her. "In a centuries-old inn, at the edge of a centuries-old village, smack dab in the center of a "haunted" forest. This place is on the far end of every bell curve you care to name. Everything that comes out here fades away, but the town of Hollow Shades just goes on and on." She tapped her chin. "Something... or somepony... is loading the dice in Hollow Shades' favor."

Spike's eyes went a little rounder. "Are you saying that the reason you think that there's an alicorn hiding here is because this place should actually be a whole lot worse?"

Lightning crashed outside. Everyone jumped a little. Flash grunted. "It makes sense," he said. "I mean if you stuck Ponyville in the middle of the Everfree, by the end of the week there wouldn't be anything left of it but a pile of monster poop."

"Fla-ash--" Twilight said, exasperated. Spike just snickered. The pegasus bodyguard shrugged as if...
to say 'well...?'

Twilight shook her head and went back to perusing the papers in front of her. She tapped her teeth with a pencil. "That's one of two possibilities, Spike" she said. "The more rational one is that the stories and legends about this place are just that-- stories and legends, and the dangers out here are wildly exaggerated. Let's be frank; we flew in here and the only evidence we've seen so far of any 'dark and terrible horrors' are those timberwolves we heard..."

KRACK-Booom. "ARRroooooowwharrgarble."

"...Which don't impress me all that much," she finished with a wry look at the window.

There was a cry outside of "Hold still, yer bastid!" followed by the loud "whack." The timberwolf let out a loud "Yaaaik" and fell still.

"Noisy pests," they heard the resident timberjack growl. Followed by the slow, steady "thwack" of an axe at work. They all cringed and flinched as they listened to the timberwolf meet its splinterly demise.

"I wouldn't think he'd work out in the rain," Flash remarked, flinching at a particularly loud 'crunch.'

They all nearly jumped out of their skins when something rapped against the windowpane. A distant flash of lightning revealed a sodden and rather disgruntled looking owl perched on the windowsill. "Owlowiscious!" Twilight exclaimed. "Quick, let him in, Spike." The window was thrown open and the library owl hopped his way inside. He shook off-- eliciting a shout of annoyance from Spike, who was in splash range-- and fluttered over to perch on a chair near the fireplace, giving the rest of them a disgusted look and a reproachful hoot for good measure.

"Don't give us that, Buster," Twilight said. "You wanted to fly off and do your own thing, get acquainted with the forest and all that." Owlowiscious sulked, but made no further comment. "So what did you find?" Owlowiscious proceeded to hoot, whistle and coo for several seconds. "Huh, you don't say..."

"You can understand him?"

"Fluttershy taught me some basics in Owl," Twilight explained. "He says he's been out talking to the other wildlife in the forest, getting the lay of the land..."

"Figures," Spike huffed. "Spooky old owl, flies around the Everfree all the time on his nightly hunts. He's probably right at home in this place."

Owlowiscious hooted. "He says 'not really, this place gives me the creeps.'"

"Nyerrgh."

"He says it wasn't easy getting them to talk; the forest critters around here are really skittish. But a couple of ravens told him a few things. Spike, write this down--- Owlowiscious, could you repeat that bit?" Spike obediently fetched a quill and paper. Owlowiscious hooted and cooed some more; Twilight translated. "They said... the places where 'those who build nests on the ground'--- that's what they call us--- "the places where 'those who build nests on the ground' live are bad for animals, but places where they used to live are worse. Stay away from the darkest parts of the woods, and the deep waters, and go to your burrows in the deep of night, because there are things that walk there that shouldn't."

The stallion and the dragonling stared at her. There was a crash of lightning outside. And,
unfortunately no gargling wolf made of wood for comic relief. "Things... that walk... that shouldn't," Spike recited carefully.

"That could mean anything," Twilight cautioned. "Forest animals use that phrase for anything that moves around on its own that isn't alive. They call locomotive engines 'Things that walk that shouldn't.'"

"Like dead things," Spike said, unrelenting.

"Spike!"

"You read those stories too..." he complained.

"Yes, and the point is they're just stories."

"Stories that the ponies around here believe, your Highness," Flash pointed out. "I talked with the oldsters down in the lobby. They had more than one ghost story to tell-- and I could tell they took them dead serious. To the point they cautioned me to lock the window shutters at night as if all our lives depended on it."

"You got that impression?" she asked.

"They looked at PeeWee like he was a lifeline." The phoenix chick fluffed up at the implied compliment. "And it's more than just that. Look--" he proceeded to point out features around the room. "The doors and shutters on this place are made of planks thick enough to stop a cannonball. The windows are thick leaded glass. Even the inside doors have bolts and sliding bars."

"Now look at the decorations. Iron horseshoes--- old school ones, the kind that NAILED on, over the fireplace and on the crossbeams, at the four cardinal points."

"That's a common enough decoration," Twilight said. "A bit medieval, if you ask me, but--"

"The mantel piece over the fireplace and both windows are decorated with dried herbs," Flash continued. He walked around the room, pointing things out. "Rosemary, blackberry, sage, even some dried-out bits of mistletoe. The decorative glassware, those little jars on the sill and mantel? Filled with rock salt. And I bet some of them are silver salts. The fireplace and window frames are done in old school wrought iron, or cold iron as it's called. And you can barely see it under the tarnish but the candlesticks in each window are silver."

"The floorboards are oak--- to be expected--" he stamped for emphasis. "But the paneling on the walls? Ash. I suspect the shutters are made of oak or ash as well." He picked up a vase that had been left on an end table. "Take a look at this...." he held it up to the light. A tangle of thin spindly wires and thread could be seen inside. "This is an old fashioned witch bottle or fairy trap. Weak protection, wouldn't hardly stop a unicorn foal's sneeze, but if you were pestered by malicious breezies or pixies or will o' wisps.... The decorative carvings in the beams? X's overlaid on O's, five-branched trees, nested crosses, leering faces--- Symbols that supposedly repelled ancient horrors."

"And for a final touch, pop quiz: what color was the inn painted?"

"I didn't get a good look, what with running inside in the rain-- but wasn't it painted cream and blue?" Twilight said.

Flash nodded seriously. "All the doors, shutters and trim are painted in a color known as 'Haint blue...' a color believed in folklore to repel ghosts and evil spirits. And from what I've seen on the way up, this is the way the whole place is decorated."
Twilight looked at the features her bodyguard pointed out, her eyes flitting back and forth as she added up everything Flash had shown her. "You're right," she said. "This isn't just an inn; it's an anti-monster fortress."

The thunder rumbled again. "Iiiiiii'm gonna lock the shutters," Spike said. He waddled over to the windows with unsurprising haste.

"So, your Highness," Flash said, taking a deep breath. "What's our next step?"

Twilight Sparkle was a very intelligent pony. She was sometimes too clever for her own good. She had forgotten more book knowledge than the next three ponies had ever learned. She was analytical and deductive and fastidious and methodical to the point of bordering on obsessive compulsive personality disorder, but she was not, as some more unkind souls had sometimes said, an arbitrary skeptic.

Because, after all, as we have just pointed out, she wasn't freaking stupid.

She bit her lip. "We proceed as planned," she said. "This is our headquarters. We go out and work during the day, bunker down here at night, and go nowhere without being armed for Ursa Minor... and try and see if we can't find the alicorn that's keeping the monsters at bay."

"Um, Twilight..." Spike said, hesitantly.

"What, Spike?"

"Um, aren't you kind of assuming that this mystery alicorn, if there is one here, is one of the good guys?"

All of them, even Owlowiscious, got very very quiet at that. "Note to self," Twilight said. "Slight oversight in our preparatory measures for possible new alicorns...."

"I'm.... really really glad that Fluttershy isn't here right now," Twilight said, in a weak attempt at humor. "She has a hard enough time on Nightmare Night...."

"Yeah, ahheheh," Spike said. "She'd be so petrified we'd have to put her in a trolly and roll her around. Her next stop couldn't possibly be as as much trouble for her as this one would have been."

The Unicorn Mountain National Forest was a delight to the eye, a rolling green carpet of emerald and gold in the morning light. The breeze that blew over it was fresh with dew and the smell of green, growing things, every lungful invigorating. Birdsong could be heard in the branches below, waking to the dawn.

The *Nature's Child* glided in over the Unicorn Mountains, brushing the treetops, serene as a swan on a mill pond. Princess Fluttershy and the young Duke Breezy Shy were on already on the deck, warming their wings in the morning sun. Rather than her regal finery, Fluttershy was kitted out in woodland explorer gear--- pith helmet, saddlebags, and pink butterfly neckerchief(5). Breezy wore the same, along with a many-pocketed ranger vest and a neckerchief was a considerably more manly blue. Fluttershy was pacing back in forth in excitement. "Oh my, I can't believe how much I've been looking forward to this," she said.

Breezy Shy couldn't help blinking in surprise. He wasn't the only one; even Captain Snowflake was giving her a surprised look. "Neither can I," Breezy said. "I mean, not to be mean or anything,
"Fluttershy, but you've never... really... liked crowds much."

"Oh, well," Fluttershy said, scuffing a hoof. "working with little foals is different. I feel so much more confident, really. Oh I'm so looking forward to teaching all the young colts about nature and the forest critters..."

Captain Snowflake and Lieutenant Captain Zephyr gave each other a look. Zephyr, by long association, knew that he would have to be the one to speak; Snowflake had volume control problems around non-military. "Ah, your Highness, we should warn you: young foals, especially colts, can be a rambunctious lot..."

Princess Fluttershy giggled. "I'm not totally inexperienced with handling young ponies, Captain Zephyr," she said. "There are these three fillies... oh I could tell you stories." She gave him a smile.

"Yes, but, how good are you at platoons of them?" Zephyr insisted. They were gliding in now over the campsite; he waved a hoof over the rail at the dozens of tents that clustered under the trees below.

Fluttershy hesitated. There were a rather lot of them... "No, everything will be fine," she insisted. "Besides, I'm not doing this all by myself. I'm sure the troop leaders have them well in hoof."

They came in over the sun-dappled forest to the landing field, coasting in for a picture perfect landing. "Oh look, how nice," Fluttershy said. "They're in formation to welcome us." It was true; scores of young colts in Colt Scout uniforms were standing in... somewhat regular rows and columns, interspersed with older stallions who were obviously the troop leaders. Even from here several of the colts could be seen yawning; it was apparently an early morning for everypony.

Zephyr frowned as he regarded the rows and columns of ponies with a practiced eye. "There seems to be a couple of troops missing..." he shrugged it off. It was Colt Scouts, not the Royal Guard.

"Private Roughy, Private Aegis, attend the Princess!" Captain Snowflake barked. The two stallions jumped and fell into place on either side of Fluttershy and her little brother.(6) "Lower the gangplank!"

"PRESENTING HER HIGHNESS, PRINCESS FLUTTERSHY!" Snowflake bellowed. Fluttershy glided down the gangplank, Breezy Shy trailing bashfully behind, her two guards stepping in time on either side.

Fidgety colts jumped to an approximation of attention, standing stiffly in place with expressions on their faces like they were badly constipated. Fluttershy quickly stepped to the microphone waiting at the bottom of the gangplank. "Oh! um... at ease?" The colts slouched with audible relief. "Thank you, thank you one and all for your welcome," she said, smiling. "I'm very happy to be here for the Colt Scout Jamboree. I'm sure we're all going to have lots of fun---"

"FIIIIIRE!"

The colts roused in alarm; the troop leaders barked orders, barely hemming in the spreading disorder. The one in the lead was bellowing "FIRE!" with every other breath; the others were just yelling in panic. And behind them, in a rolling, smoky grey wave, came---

Squirrels. Hundreds and hundreds of barking, chattering, squalling squirrels.

They were bounding along in hot pursuit of the fleeing colts, and even the ponies present who couldn't speak to animals could tell from the sound that they were pissed. They spread out as they came, engulfing the campground in angry furry rodent.
That did it. The carefully regimented scouts panicked and scattered in every direction, their troop leaders in pursuit. Some ran for the trees, others ran for the hills, others ran in circles.

"Guards! On the Princess!" Snowflake bellowed. Half a score of armored ponies leapt or flew down from the ship to form a phalanx around Fluttershy and her brother. Golden Aegis lit up his horn, surrounding the group in a glowing field.

"Aegis! Set that field to squirrel-only, and I cannot believe I just said that," Zephyr shouted.

"Already done, Sir," Aegis said. The glow spread outward, taking in more ponies and sending some of the squirrels running. The rippling bubble of light stopped at about a hundred feet. "Best I can do sir," Aegis said apologetically.

"I'll have to do," Zephyr replied. It seemed to be more than enough; already campers were flocking to the safety of the squirrel free zone, nursing bites and scratches.

A red-maned earth pony, wearing a campaign hat and a whistle and a face so red it looked boiled---presumably the Scoutmaster General---came galloping up. "Princess, I have no idea what is going on but I do apologize for--- " he began, only to be interrupted when the five colts everypony had first seen fleeing the rodent wave barreled into his legs. He rolled to his feet and regarded the five scouts sprawled all around him. "TROOP THIRTEEN THIRTEEN!" He shouted, his face going even redder. "What is the meaning of this?"

Ignoring the angry stallion, the five colts turned their attention to the princess. "We're sorry--"

"We don't know what went wrong--"

" WHAT DID YOU DO?"

At the Scoutmaster General's roar, the colts jumped and spun around to face him.

"It's not our fault!"

"We just wanted to invite some of the local animals to the welcoming party," one said.

Another jumped in. "So we had Chatterbox--" he pointed to a colt with a double word-bubble cutie mark and a guilty expression. "--Talk to a couple of squirrels to try and invite them...."

"And we dunno what he said to them but he really cheesed 'em off--"

"It's not my fault!" Chatterbox protested. "I don't know what I said wrong, I'm bad at squirrel and rodent--"

"AAAAGH!" one of them shouted, pointing at a nearby squirrel-mobbed tent. It was shaking and spewing shredded belongings out the flap like someone had set loose a running weed eater inside. "They've gotten into our tent! They're going for my Fruity Oaty bar stash!" He grabbed a fallen tree branch and raced to rescue his precious hoard of candy.

"My comics!" "My sleeping bag!" "My underpants!" Colts began grabbing whatever weapon was handy---branches, butterfly nets, pillows, campfire utensils---and charged off to try and save their campsite from the angry rodents.

Fluttershy couldn't help it. There were just some things that inevitably had to be said. "But why were you yelling 'FIRE?' " she asked Chatterbox.
Chatterbox gave her a look that said worlds about what a boy thought about the smarts of dumb ol' girls. "'Cause nopony woulda COME if I'd shouted 'SQUIRRELS,'" he said scornfully. He grabbed a hotdog skewer and ran off to do battle with the squirrelly horde.

The Scoutmaster General turned to Fluttershy with an expression of stonefaced stoicism. "Welcome to the Jamboree, Ma'am," he said with a tip of his hat brim. That said he turned and ran off after his campers, yelling orders he knew would be ignored and blowing blasts on his whistle that were ignored only slightly less.

Fluttershy watched the growing bedlam all around her in dismay and said the only thing that came to mind:

"Oh...My....."

(1) Two lanky, crack-voiced colts who were the innkeeper's sons.

(2) The study of ancient history gets a lot less ambiguous when you have eyewitnesses to it sitting on the throne. At least after one of them learns her lesson and stops playing Cryptic Maiden of Mystery with her interviewers.

(3) She was quite correct. It was an unsurprising consequence of her alma mater's predilection for using abandoned dragon eggs for admissions testing. While most of the hatchlings that resulted were adopted back into dragon clans, some few stayed in pony hooves. Most of the dragon-unicorn partnerships that resulted were far flung explorers in service to the crown, chosen because they represented-- right from the hatching-- the ideal partnership of high magical talent and physical toughness.

(3a) It has to be noted the ponies in question tended to have rather... unique talents. For instance you had the she-dragonling Flambe' who was partnered with the dashing and often slightly crispy vulcanologist Asbestos the Inflammable, and the Monsterologist duo of Fang the Fierce and Bezoar the Indigestible, whose discoveries concerning proper procedure for giant monster diplomacy were of questionable value (generally summed up with the single word "Don't"), but compensated for with his startlingly detailed studies of various monstrous creature's alimentary canals. The inside view, one might say.

(4) The meaning of the phrase is different depending on the species of critter, of course. Those who build their nest on the ground is the phrase used by birds. But groundhogs call them 'those who have burrows on top of the grass,' beavers call them 'those who build their lodges on dry land,' et cetera. The common thread being the obvious one: they think that the talking beasts are crazy for building their homes where they do.

(5) Said outfit was making some of her Guards' brains sizzle with fantasies of heroic rescues from savage cannibal pony jungle tribes featuring themselves and an artfully disheveled and ever-so-grateful nature loving princess...

(6) Zephyr noted with some amusement that Orange Roughy took the side furthest from the young Duke.
"AAAAhh! Help me, somepony help me!!"

"What da hay?" Babs Seed sat bolt upright in bed and looked over at her bunkmate. Applebloom was shouting in her sleep. She was tangled in the bedsheets and was flailing all four limbs about like a demented grain thresher. Babs moved to shake her awake. "Applebloom, snap outta it already!"

The two were still sharing the Royal suite with Applejack. The ship was more than large enough for them to have their own cabin, but after some deliberation the two fillies had persuaded the grownups to let them all stay together. A second emperor-sized canopy bed had been promptly and deferentially moved into the Royal suite next to the first, and the girls had shared it ever since.

Now Babs was seeing a small drawback to it, as apparently her bedmate was going through one rip-snorter of a nightmare. She reached over and tried to grab hold of Applebloom to stop her thrashing. "Applebloom, wake up! Cousin Jackie--!"

Applejack had left her own bed and was at their bedside in a moment. "Applebloom, Applebloom, what's wrong, sugarcube?" She took the filly's shoulders in her hooves and shook her gently.

Applebloom finally started awake. She looked at the two of them with wide eyes, panting. Then her eyes puddled up. "Oh, Applejack, it was awful--!" she sobbed.

"There now, it was just a bad dream..." Applejack said. She pulled the crying filly into a hug; Babs burrowed in from the side, adding her own comfort. It was then that Applebloom dropped the bomb that shocked them to the core.

"Ah... ah don't wanna be a Cutie Mark Crusader anymore!"

There was a rapping at the cabin door. "Your Majesty?" one of the guards called. "Is everything well?"

"We're fine, we're fine," Applejack called back. "Jest a nightmare." There was a sort of grunt of acknowledgment from the other side of the door. Applejack turned her attention back to the two fillies. Applebloom was utterly distraught, and Babs wasn't looking much better. Both of them were wide awake and not looking to go back to sleep any time soon. "Hold on, easy there Applebloom. Sumpin' in that dream tore you up, an I think we all need to calm down a bit...What say we get some breakfast?" she suggested. A little comfort food seemed to be the order of the day.

Babs looked at the grandfather clock sitting across the room. "But it's not even four in the mornin'," she protested.

"So, we'll call it a mid night snack," Applejack said. She took on a lofty air. "'Sides, ah'm the Princess, an' if I say it's time fer breakfast at oh-dark-thirty in the mornin', then it's time fer breakfast at oh-dark-thirty in the mornin'. So there." She tipped her nose in the air. Babs chuckled and even Applebloom giggled a bit through her snuffles.

"Now let's see here..." Chewing her lip, Applejack regarded the 'Intercom.' It was a brass and copper doodad sitting on a little end table between the beds, and it had a trio of speaking horns, a bell, and what looked to the technology averse farmpony like a kajillion little fiddly levers. It was supposed to let her speak to ponies in any part of the ship, and she'd been shown how to use it, but she could
never quite figure it out. "Dern..." she poked a lever experimentally. "Now how d’you set this thing to call down to the galley...?"

Applebloom giggled and slid across the bed next to her. "Here, Applejack," she said. "Single line, pipe number 3, an’ push the button to sound the bell." She proceeded to show off her knack for mechanical devices. A few deft flicks of her hoof and the complicated looking gadget bent to the filly's will. The brass horn buzzed and a tinny voice came out:

"Yes, your highness?"

"Uh yeah, the girls and I were in the mood for a late night snack...um, something breakfasty?" Applejack said. "Just sorta surprise us."

"Ah, a little midnight comfort food then?" The voice replied. "Of course, your Highness, it will be right up."

A short while later there was a knock at the door, and a unicorn mare in a maid's uniform came in, pushing a trolley. "Breakfast in bed, your Highness?" she said, giving a curtsy.

"Oh, thankyah. Uh, we ain't all roustin' none of y'all out of bed 'r nothin, are we?" Applejack said uncertainly.

"Oh no, mum," she said in a Trottingham accent. "I'm on the late shift. This is actually near the end of the day for me." She quickly levitated the breakfast trays onto the bed for each of them and began serving up breakfast treats from the trolley--- flapjacks, cinnamon buns, french toast sticks, biscuits and muffins, little bowls of porridge, plenty of butter, syrup and preserves to top things off and tall glasses of milk to wash it down. The mood lightened considerably as the three of them set to eating with a will.

It took more than a quick nibble to quench a hearty Apple appetite. When the noshing finally slowed down, Applejack set down her fork, dabbed at her mouth with a napkin like her Aunt Orange had showed her, and looked at Applebloom. "Ready to talk about it?" she said.

Applebloom took a long swallow of milk and set her glass down. "Ah guess so," she said, wiping her milk mustache off with her fetlock. "It was a nightmare, Applejack. A real awful one..."

"We guessed dat much," Babs chortled around a mouthful of cinnamon bun. "What was it about?"

"It was about... about me getting my cutie mark," Applebloom said glumly.

Applejack nodded. "Oh, like before...? With, what was it, twittermites and what not?"

Applebloom shook her head. "No! This was... well it was worse. And it was--" her face scrunched up. She almost looked... guilty? "It was awful. And it was...STUPID. But..."

"Jest tell us about it," Applejack said. "Start at the beginnin'."

Applebloom took a sip of juice and sighed. "Okay. It started out, me an' the others-- except for Babs, sorry Babs-- we were at the clubhouse. An' Pipsqueak, that's the little pinto colt from Trottingham?"

"Ah know him."

"He shows up and asks if the Cutie Mark Crusaders can help get him elected."

Applebloom shrugged. "I dunno, I guess. Anyway, we run around the schoolyard carryin' him over our heads, singin' about what a great candidate he is... he gives a speech, he gets elected, and Diamond Tiara loses. Then Diamond Tiara starts singin' about how sad she is because she's really a good pony deep down inside and she just wants to be nice--" this was followed by elaborate gagging motions. Applejack nearly snorted juice out her nose. "And so all three of us go and try to help her figure out her cutie mark..."

Bab's brow furrowed. "What does her cutie mark haveta do with being a good or a bad pony? And why wouldn't she figure out her own cutie mark anyway?" Both Applejack and Babs looked equally befuddled. It was the most nonsensical thing they'd ever heard of. You got your cutie mark because you discovered your special talent. You knew what it meant before anypony else possibly could. Needing somepony else to explain your cutie mark to you was as unlikely as needing somepony to tell you what your own name was.

Applebloom scratched her head. "I dunno, somethin' about how she thought it meant she was special like a princess, but it was really about how she could get people to do what she wanted.... I dunno, it made sense then, but it gets dumber the more ah think about it."

"Idears in dreams tend to be that way," Applejack said knowingly.

"Anyhow we help her figure out that her cutie mark means she's a GOOD pony, not a bad one, and suddenly she's all sweetness and light and gets her daddy to pay to fix up the school playground...." More gagging and retching motions accompanied this, with Babs helping this time. "And so everypony's happy and singing and stuff, and me an' Sweetiebelle an' Scootaloo are all sayin' how it's so wonderful crusadin' for other people's cutie marks too, an' we don't care if we never get a cutie mark so long as we can keep crusadin' like that FOREVER---" she threw her hooves in the air and slapped them on the bed. "An' that's when we get our cutie marks.

"We give each other a high hoof. An' we start floatin' in the air an' glowin' and stuff... then there's this bright flash and there they are. Three cutie marks--- Three stupid looking Crusader badges, made up of our mane colors. They were awful. And you couldn't even tell 'em apart unless you got in real close an' squinted."

Babs paused in mid-chew. Her eyes started to cross. "You mean... you got your cutie marks..."

"In crusading for cutie marks." The loathing in Applebloom's voice was as thick as the blueberry syrup.

Babs almost choked laughing. "Oh wow--"

"Um, I don't think cutie marks could work like that," Applejack said cautiously. Getting a cutie mark in getting cutie marks? She had visions of cutie mark magic dividing by zero and imploding the universe. She shook her head, dispelling the disturbing mental image. "But I don't quite understand why you're so upset... I mean, don't y'all like crusadin' with your friends?"

Babs and Applebloom both rolled their eyes at her. "Come on, Cousin Jackie," Babs said. "Don't you know how awful that would be? It would be like... winning a pie eating contest and finding out first prize was a coupon for free pie. Or a getting first place in a spelling bee, and winning a dictionary."

Applejack chewed that one over while she munched on a french toast stick. It would be like graduating from school, only to find out your reward was to take school all over again, forever, she thought. Yep, that did sound pretty horrible...
Applebloom rambled on. She looked distraught and disgusted at the same time. "Three badges. All the same. In the one thing we're ABSOLUTELY THE WORST at-- understandin' Cutie Marks. It was like gettin' a Cutie Mark participation medal."

"Ugh," Babs agreed. "That is AWFUL---!" Make no mistake; it was an awful idea. As much fun as the CMC had "crusading," every last one of them longed for the day when the nightmare would finally be over. Getting stuck with crusading for cutie marks forever? Too awful to contemplate.

"And then our butts fused together." Applebloom said dully.

That one was too much. Babs DID choke this time, on a mouthful of orange juice, and Applejack sprayed french toast crumbs. "Don't laugh!" Applebloom yelled. "It was horrible! We all sorta... mooshed together, like a big blob o' marshmallow." She pantomimed something undergoing the aforementioned mooshing. "We were this big three-headed thing, an' all we could do was wobble around on all our legs, talking about cutie mark this, an' cutie mark that, an' going 'cutie marks, cutie marks, yip yippie yay!' " she waggled her head back and forth with a dopey grin on her face. "An' then the Flim Flam brothers took us an' stuck us in a cage, and charged ponies two bits to ask us cutie mark questions," she finished. "And that's when I woke up."

"It was awful. It's like the whole dream was tellin' me that... that the only thing special about me was that I was a Cutie Mark Crusader. That I wasn't nuthin' without that but... but just another...." She stopped and rubbed her forehooves together, refusing to meet either Babs' or Applejack's eye. Applejack felt her Element twinge. She barely needed the cue; she could see for herself that something more than the fear of getting a meaningless Cutie Mark was fretting her little sister. "Go on," she urged.

Applebloom shrank down a little. "You'll be mad at me," she said, her voice small. "You'll think I'm horrible for thinking it."

Applejack paused, but decided to be truthful. "Maybe," she said gently. "I might get upset at somethin' you say. I don't know, I ain't heard it yet. But if'n I get mad, I'll get over it. You're more important to me than anything that might make me fuss." She reached over and patted Applebloom's cheek. "G'wan an' tell me, sugarcube. I promise I'll hold my tongue and listen."

Applebloom took a deep breath. "The cutie marks. They were a little different on the inside. Scootaloo had a lightnin' bolt and wing, for her stunt ridin'?" Applejack nodded; lightning was a common symbol for athletes and daredevils. "An' Sweetiebelle had a musical note an' a star, for her singin'. She's gonna be a music star some day, just you see. But mine... It was an apple in a heart. Just... an apple. Like, there was nuthin' else to me." She cringed back as if she expected a blow. "I... I don't-- I love you all, I love bein' an Apple--- but I-- I don't wanna be just an Apple!"

To the filly's surprise, Applejack let out a low chuckle. "I think I know where you're comin' from, sugarcube," she said, her voice still gentle. "You're not the only one who's been afeared of that... Lemme tell you a li'l story.

"When ah was, shoot, not even knee high to you, we had an Apple family reunion, and me bein' the youngest everypony was makin' a fuss about me. They'd say things like 'oh, she got her mama's eyes,' or 'she has her daddy's nose,' or 'that's her grampa's chin for sure...' Me bein' a little thing I got upset. I went cryin' to Granny Smith. 'I don' wanna have everypony else's face,' I said, 'I wanna look like ME!' " She chuckled a bit. "I was so upset 'cause I wanted to be ME. Not just a knockoff of every other Apple."

"That's what's botherin' you, ain't it," she said. "You're not scared that you're gonna end up with a
silly cutie mark. You're afraid that there ain't nothin' special about you. That there's nothin' different about you but your crusader cape, or your family name. Aren't you?" It was a statement, not a question.

Applebloom wouldn't look up to meet her eye. But she bit her lip and nodded.

"Well you listen to me, sugarcube. That's stuff and nonsense. Just like everypony's been trying to tell you silly fillies all this time... just cause you ain't found your cutie mark yet, it don't mean you ain't special. It just means you ain't found your passion yet--- that special one-and-only something that means the world to you, and only you.

"And believe me, I unnerstand about wantin' to be more than 'just an Apple.' Don't you remember my cutie mark story... how I went an' stayed with Aunt an' Uncle Orange fer a while?"

"Yeah, but-- you came back," Applebloom pointed out.

"Ayep. But think about it, sugarcube, You have an Aunt and Uncle Orange. An' how d'you suppose we ended up with them as relatives?" She grinned as the realization dawned on Applebloom's face that at some point, an Orange had sprouted in the Apple family tree. "Just like your Pa's sister, you'll be a part of the Apple family no matter what you become-- an' just because you're an Apple don't mean you can't become anything you want." She leaned in and tousled Applebloom's mane. "Understand?"

Applebloom nodded. She smiled hesitantly, then more confidently, and tucked into her unfinished breakfast with a will. "Glad to see it," Applejack said. She picked up a slice of toast and began stirring the jar of honey with the dipper. "I guess this little trip has been a little bumpy for y'all, ain't it," she said apologetically. "Nightmares and what all..."

"Least it wasn't the Honeybee nightmare this time," Babs said.

"The Honeybee nightmare?" Applejack said.

Applebloom gulped and cringed at the memory. "Yeah. You remember what I told you about that.. um... accident at the Cherry Jubilee? At the honey display?"

The honey dipper slowed as Applejack recalled Applebloom's debacle the prior week upon discovering exactly how bees made honey. "Um, yeah, I recall that," she said.

"Well, for a couple nights there I had nightmares," Applebloom confessed. "They always start out so nice, too! I'm a little bitty pony, the size of a bumblebee, sitting in a big flower. And the bees find me and they're big and fuzzy and friendly, and they invite me to come visit their hive..."

"Uh huh," Applejack said.

Applebloom's expression turned ill. "And we get there, and golly gee, they wanna share some of their new batch honey with me-- and you know how I told you bees pass honey back an' forth--- "

The honey dipper froze. "Uhhh...."

"and they all have themselves a nice big bellyful of their latest batch, and it'd be ever so rude to turn them down...."

The honey dipper returned to the jar, and the jar discreetly floated over to the wastebasket in the corner of the room. "Pass the gooseberry jam, wouldja please?" Applejack said, her expression not changing an inch.
Babs, she of the cast iron stomach, regarded the Princess of Honesty with a touch of condescension as she scarfed down her own honey slathered biscuit. "I'm glad Princess Luna stopped by in your dreams and helped you with that one," she said to Applebloom. "Havin' you wake up three times a night to run to the bathroom and brush your teeth got to be kinda old..."

Elsewhere, two princesses-- one pink and frizzy, the other midnight blue-- sat up burning the midnight oil. Luna was reciting some of the highlights... or low lights... of her nightly dream duties for the past few days.

"Bug Barf..." she said, her eyes haunted. "Bug Barf from bugs the size of ponies..."

A servant came into the room pushing a tea trolley. "Would your highnesses like sugar or honey with your tea?" she chirped.

"SUGAR," came the immediate reply.

"Well, like I said-- it's been a rough trip for you so far, ain't it," Applejack said. "I become a Princess and get to go on a grand mission for the Princess, you come along and..."

"And get in fights, have horrible nightmares and puke on cute boys," Babs said dryly.

"Babs--!" to Applejack's surprise, Applebloom's cheeks turned red.

"Oho, so he was CUTE was he?" Applejack teased. Applebloom just turned redder. "Oh, sugarcube, no wonder you were so tore up," Applejack laughed. "Tell you what though, I think our next stop will be right up your alley."

"Really?" Applebloom said, not sounding very hopeful.

"Really," Applejack said confidently. "Our next stop is a lil' wingding called the um...." she squinted and waved her hoof, trying to recall the name of the damned thing.

"The Annual East Equestrian Farming and Industry Trade Expo, your Highness," the maid said.

The three of them nearly jumped out of their skins. "Yeep! Sakes, forgot you were there, darlin'," Applejack said. "You sure do keep quiet."

"Thank you, mum."

"Um. Right." They paused. "Uhh, you were sayin'?"

""The Annual East Equestrian Farming and Industry Trade Expo," the meek little maid went on. "It's something of a cross between a trade exhibition and a job fair, where hundreds of businessponies and innovators all over the east coast come together to show off their latest innovations and recruit talented ponies to come work for them..." she gave them a rueful half smile. "And if my uncle Whole Sale is to be believed, to get up to shenanigans a hundred miles away from where their families can hear about it."

"....Ah." Applejack chuckled, then turned to Babs and Applebloom. "Y'see? A whole big festival of all different sorts of jobs ponies do. Betcha you'll get a thousand and one ideas for Crusadin' just
walkin' around. Shoot, you might even get lucky and find your cutie marks right there." The two fillies, Applebloom especially, brightened up considerably at this.

"That sounds gr...great," Applebloom said, letting loose with a wide yawn.

"Yeah," Babs agreed, yawning herself. "Even if we don't do any crusadin', it sounds like fun...."

"You two should get some shuteye," Applejack said. "We'll be arriving in Baltimore around brunch, and y'all are gonna have a big day." The two nodded sleepily. Applejack tucked them both in as the maid deftly rounded up the breakfast trays and stowed them away. The two were out like a light the moment their heads hit the pillows. "Can't believe I'm actually encouragin' em to go Cutie Mark Crusadin'," Applejack said softly to the maid, shaking her head in amusement. "I sure hope that Expo is ready for what's comin' when those two arrive."

The maid chuckled quietly and covered the trolley with a tablecloth. "Cutie marks," she said. "They're such a simple thing, and yet they can cause so much heartache..." she got behind the trolley and looked over to Applejack. "Will you still be having regular breakfast?"

Applejack thought it over. "Mebbe just a quick brunch when we get up," she decided. "Just throw a few more apple type fixin's on the cart this time."

"Of course, mum."

"Uh. And no honey."

"Of course, mum."
Chapter 36

Despite everything they still got an early start in the morning. There were just some things you couldn't take out of a country girl; Applejack and Applebloom were up at the crack of dawn, chirpy as birds and ready to go. Babs Seed on the other hand was a stumbling, grousy zombie, like a proper city girl. (At least until she wheedled some coffee-with-milk out of the sympathetic staff.) They had a quick breakfast, and then Applejack had an even quicker staff meeting prepping her for events at the Expo.

Then, the royally appointed hoofmaids fell upon them, and over Applejack’s protestations dragged them back to her quarters where approximately half the contents of a Canterlot salon awaited them. They were sweet, they were polite, and they were utterly impossible to negotiate with as they set to with combs, brushes, shampoos, makeup, perfumes, and a disturbing number of other accoutrements of the beautician's trade that Applejack couldn't name. "This isn't some mere farmer's market, your Highness," the leader of her assailants said as she tweezed Applejack's eyebrows. "This is a much more refined and upscale venue. You have to look your best, not... rough-and-tumble and scruffy."

"OWCH! I am rough an' tumble. An' if you don't lay off with them tweezers you'll find out just how much!" Applejack scowled and slapped the nasty pinching thing away from her face.

"Oh do leave be with the eyebrow plucking, Powder Puff," a pony on her other side said. "We don't want to overdo it after all." She stepped back and rubbed her chin thoughtfully. "Yes.. we don't want her to look like a painted china doll. We have to work carefully here. With the right hairstyle and makeup, we'll give her the visage of an honest down home country filly."

Applejack cocked an aching eyebrow at her, amused in spite of herself. "So what yer sayin' is you gotta put a fake face over top o' my real face, to make me look like what I already am?" she said. The hoofmaids actually had the grace to look a little embarrassed at the ridiculousness of this. Working for the Alicorn of Honesty, they realized, might occasionally involve a few jabs in sensitive spots.

"Oh c'mon, Applejack," Applebloom said from across the room where another hoofmaid was adding delicate touches of makeup to her eyelids. "Don't give 'em a hard time. Don't you like gettin' all pretty once in a while? Like Granny Smith always says, 'go ahead and slap on a coat of paint if the ol' barn needs it."

The maids broke up in a fit of giggles. "Cain't say I care for bein' compared to an old barn," Applejack quipped.

"Cousin Jackie, they're not trying to cover up who you are," Babs said. "They're trying to bring it out."

"I know, I know," Applejack chuckled. "I'm just yankin' their tails a little. Go on, ladies; I know I need to look at least a little gussied up for this shindig." Mollified, the mares returned to grooming her mane.

A maid was currently giving Bab's short bob a quick trim. "Perhaps a pixie cut," she murmured, "so it gives a little swoop here, instead of falling down in your eye?" Babs nodded and then sat perfectly still, watching what the mare with the scissors did with keen interest. A few deft snips, a tweak with a curling iron and a touch of mane spray and the filly's mane framed her face in a perfect pixie bob....without hanging down in her eyes.
Babs admired the effect in a hand mirror. "I like it," she said, pleased. "How'd you do it?"

"It would take a while to explain," the hoofmaid said with a smile. "But why don't you watch while I give Lady Applebloom a trim and touchup?" Babs nodded eagerly.

Things weren't going as well with Applejack. "Perhaps that Manehattan style you wore the first day...?" one hoofmaid suggested doubtfully.

"No no," the other said. "That's far too fancy for this. The grand launching was one thing, but this Expo isn't... quite up to that."

"For once I'm inclined," Applejack said. "Upper crust business types or not, what I've heard so far tells me these folks are used to having a little bit of grease on their sleeve. I need somethin' nice lookin'... but practical, too." Her hairdressers rubbed their chins, pondering.

"I got an idea!" Babs piped up. She left off watching Applebloom's styling and trotted over to squint with peculiar focus at Applejack's brushed and unbound mane. "Oh yeah, easy peasy." She ran over to the wardrobe and fetched a clothes hanger and returned, twisting a length of it into a loop.

"A filly at school showed me this trick," Babs said. She reached for Applejack's mane-- only to be blocked by the hoof of the mares tending her.

"Come now, dear, we really can't have you--"

"Oh g'wan, let her," Applejack said mildly. "I don't think she'll do anything y'all can't fix in a moment." That opinion didn't seem to be quite universal; especially when Babs picked a pair of trimming scissors out of the hair tonic.

"I'm just trimming the split ends," Babs said scornfully at the hoofmaiden's sharply indrawn breaths.

"Stay calm," Applejack ordered. "Our family's been trimmin' each other's manes ever since we learned to pinch a penny. If worse comes to worst I got me a hair-growing spell." And failing that, a hat, she thought to herself a bit less calmly.

"Really? Neat," Babs said as the scissors snipped. "Where'd ya get it?"

"Princess Twilight made us all a gift," Applejack said. "She wrote a little book: '101 handy household cantrips.' Had hair-trimmin' and hair-growin' spells. I'm pretty sure Twi uses 'em on her own mane."

Babs rolled her eyes. "That explains a lot," she muttered as she ran a brush through Applejack's mane. "Don't get me wrong, Cousin Jackie, Twilight's nice-- but dat there is a mare who definitely needs an up-do." Tongue sticking out, she gathered Applejack's mane in her hooves and slid it through the wire loop... then, as the hoofmaids watched in fascination, turned it about and slid the loop back through Applejack's mane. She did that loop the loop step a couple of times more. "An' over and under, and over and... done," she said, pulling the loop free and letting the rolled hair fall back against Applejack's neck.

"Ooo, how clever!"

"And so quick, too!" another enthused. "A perfect double chignon...."

A mirror was lifted up so Applejack could see Bab's handiwork. "There, a fancy french hair bun," Babs said, dropping the scissors, comb and wire loop into the barbicide. "It's a look that says 'oh look, I'm so fancy' and 'I'm very smart and put my hair up around all this machinery.' "
"Well ain't that clever," Applejack said, turning her head to admire the style. Her mane rested on the base of her neck in a perfect braided double-bun.

"And you have a hairnet of gold filigree that will look absolutely perfect with it, your Highness..."

"Where did you come up with this?" one of the hoofmaids asked, tapping the loop.

"My friend Topsy Tail," Babs said. "She uses it to braid her hair into pigtails. But I figured out you could do all sorts of things with it... buns, and waterfall braids, and yeeWOWowowWOO!" The Manehattan filly suddenly began jumping about, waggling her rear end like she'd been bee stung. "Who zapped me with a towel?" She began turning in a circle, looking back at her hip.

Nopony answered. They were too busy pointing at the shiny pair of scissors embossed on her flank and squealing with glee.

Then their schedule really got derailed.
They arrived at the Expo a little after ten, later than they expected--- but nopony seemed to mind. They were too busy making a fuss over Babs, and getting in a tizzy over planning her cuteceneara for that very day. Even the Roughnecks had been in a celebratory mood, joshing her, tousling her mane (which got a few indignant shouts out of her) and congratulating her on her big day. The moment they had arrived Applejack had arranged things with the Expo staff and reserved a space for the party for after hours.

The director of the Expo, an over-energetic teal and brown earth pony named Dime Shift, ("Short for Paradigm, your Highness, but please call me Dime") was more than happy to help out. "Having you here for The Annual East Equestrian Farming and Industry Trade Expo is a real feather in our cap, your Highness," he gushed as they trotted along. "We're more than happy to set aside a corner of the pavilion for your niece's--"

"Er, cousin, not niece," Applejack corrected.

"--Your cousin's cuteceneara," he said without missing a beat. "There's certainly more than enough room to spare."

"So I see," Applejack murmured, looking around. The Expo was being held in what Applejack's countrified mind could only think of as an enormous greenhouse, right in the heart of Baltimare. Its glass and steel framework reached high overhead, three, four stories easily, more than high enough that Rainbow Dash could have done some of her better stunts under the vaulted dome, and branched off North, South, East and West. Most of downtown Ponyville could have fit inside the pavilion with room to spare. Even with the conventioneers setting up exhibitions everywhere, there was room to spare.

"Yes, well," Dime Shift laughed self-effacedly, "the E.E.F.I.T.E. isn't really what the Glass Palace was built for," he said. "It's meant for the World Expo coming next year. Wait till that comes in, then you'll see this place packed. We're just taking advantage of the early completion, renting the space for cheap for our own humble little convention, don't you see."

"...Glass Palace?" Applebloom asked. She and Babs were trotting along, doing their best to keep up with the longer-legged adults.

Mr. Shift cleared his throat and tugged at his bow tie. "Well, um, they were going to call it the Crystal Palace, originally," he said. "But then the Crystal Empire returned with it's real palace made of crystal, and well, it um, seemed kind of pretentious to keep the name after that..." Applebloom made an 'oh' with her mouth and nodded.

They had reached the central dome of the pavilion, where the stands for the convention's opening ceremony were located. They were brought up short however by a rather odd decoration on display. Standing on a pedestal behind the podium was a startlingly familiar looking statue.

"Discord?" Applebloom yelped.

It was an easy mistake to make; at first glance the creature carved in stone did look a great deal like the notorious draconequus; misshapen, disproportionate, with cockeyed eyes and mismatch limbs. It was only at second glance that the differences became obvious; the head was larger and more
dragonlike, with enormous flaring nostrils. Instead of antlers it had large, pointed gremlin ears. Its six arms-- or were they legs?--- were crooked and had way too many joints, and where Discord's body was long and sinuous, this creature seemed to be made of crooked, jammed-together segments, like a crashed railroad train. It stood in a stooped over position, bound to its pedestal by dozens of chains. It was flanked on three sides by statues of ponies, one from each tribe, who were wielding sledgehammers as they staked the chains binding it to the ground. It had an expression of absolute frustration and rage on its face. It was so unsettling that the Roughnecks actually hefted their weapons when they saw it.

Dime Shift laughed. "Oh no, though I can see that's an easy mistake to make," he said. "This is a classic statue by the classical Neightalian inventor and artist, Bold Lion..... "Malfunziona." It's a portrayal of scholars, artists and inventors, and their constant battle against damage, dysfunction and disrepair." He gave the words a dramatic sweep of his hoof.

"Heh. Old Malfunziona has been on display at every World's Expo since Bold Lion carved him 500 years ago. According to legend, every World's Fair, his face gets just a little bit angrier...."

Applejack and Applebloom shared a furtive look. Dime Shift saw it and laughed. "I assure you, this isn't another draconequus, Highness," he said. "He climbed up on the platform and tapped a hoof on the statue. "Look. If you look closely you can see the chisel marks. This statue started out as a lump of stone, not as a chaos monster."

The Apple sisters and their entourage didn't exactly look more confident. There probably wasn't a pony in Canterlot or Ponyville that hadn't been traumatized by Discord's first rampage. But for them it had been personal.

Applejack had gone toe-to-hoof with the draconequus alongside the other Bearers of the Elements, and hadn't come out the other side without having her self-image shaken right to the core by his head games. It had rankled deeply when Celestia had released him on parole; it was Applejack's rather vehement protestations that had pushed the Princess to forge the power-dampening manacles that the draconequus now wore, before the Element of Honesty would cooperate and help release him. Even now she probably trusted the "reformed" Discord about as far as she could spit lying on her stomach.

Applebloom, for her part, had suffered differently. Celestia had made it repeatedly clear that the reason Discord had escaped was that the spell imprisoning him had slowly weakened over thousands of years till it had finally given way. But thanks to the coincidence of a school field trip and an ill-timed squabble, she and the other crusaders had to endure the gossip of more superstitious ponies who'd blamed the Cutie Mark Crusaders for the Chaos Monster's escape. It was pure coincidence, but that hadn't stopped the whispers by the more foolish. Or the undeserved guilt.

Understandably, neither one of them were particularly thrilled with the idea of a second monster-turned-statue lurking about.

Applebloom suddenly ran up onto the stand and squinted hard at the statue, her nose an inch from the stone. "I... think he's right," she said uncertainly. "It sorta looks like a chisel's been at it, real faint-like..."

On an impulse Applejack called up her Element. To her considerable relief, she could sense the truth of the matter; Dime Shift wasn't merely confident this was the truth, he had the sort of confidence that came from being extremely well-informed on the matter. Not only did he know of the statue's origins, she could sense his connections to others by their own connection to the issue. She could follow the statue's past through those connections. Through him she could see that he knew ponies that knew ponies that knew the statue's past and origins---an unbroken chain tracing all the way back to a vague, smoky image in the mists of the pasts of a sturdy Neightalion stallion patiently working
on a block of stone with hammer and chisel.

She sighed in relief... and got up and took a squint at the statue from close range for good measure. Yes, there were the chisel marks; faint ones, she wouldn't known what to look for if she hadn't caught a glimpse of the ghostly hoof of the original craftsman making them. "Ayep, I can see," she announced out loud. "At ease, fellas, this statue ain't gonna be gettin' up to walk around." Behind her the Roughnecks accompanying her visibly relaxed and returned their weapons to parade rest.

"Heavens, you do take this seriously," Dime Shift said with a nervous laugh.

"Y'all would too; Me an' my family were on the front lines when Discord had his little coming-out party."

"Oh. Well, um." Dime Shift was at a loss for words for that.

"Babs, Applebloom?" Applejack said. "Mr. Shift an' I are gonna be busy preparing for the official Grand Opening, a lotta meetin's and stuff. Why don't you two go and look around the fair for a few hours? Meet us back here at five."

"Sure, Cousin Jackie!"


"Whaaat?" Babs said, grinning and giving her the elbow. "Ya don't wanna hang out with yer cousin?"

Applebloom giggled and beeped her on the nose. "Well I can't hang out with you and buy you your cuteceneara present at the same time," she said.

"Aha! Bribery will get ya everywhere," Babs said. The two fillies giggled.

"All right then." Applejack said, amused. "Lockheed? Grunt?" The gryphon and the diamond dog stepped forward and saluted. "Would y'all be so kind as to accompany my sister an' cousin while they tour the Expo? If that's all right, that is," she said as an aside to Dime Shift.

"Oh, certainly. Nearly all the venues are already set up for the early public," he said. "This is probably the best time, anyway, ahead of the crowds."

"Go on, you two," Applejack said. She summoned two coin purses full of bits; the girls snatched them out of the air and galloped gleefully off in opposite directions, their chaperones trotting after. "Five O'Clock, you two!" Applejack called after them.

"Okay Applejack!"

"Okay Cousin Jackie!"

Applejack smiled as she watched them gallop away. They were growing up quick; one of them with a cutie mark and she wouldn't be too surprised if the other one found hers before the end of the week. Soon they'd be off into the big bold world. She was glad she was there to watch them explore a little of it before they grew up. She sniffled a little and turned her attention back to Dime Shift.

"Now, Mr. Shift," she said brightly. "Y'all were going to tell me the schedule of events?"

"So what do ya think I should get Babs for her Cuteceneara?" Applebloom asked Lockheed
"Um, I wouldn't know, gryphons don't have Cutesy whatevers," Lockheed said idly. He strode along confidently, scanning the crowd visually, his long lion-eagle legs keeping up easily with the trotting filly. "Are they like birthday parties?"

"More or less," Applebloom confirmed, looking over the displays. "I'm thinkin' maybe a fancy groomin' set?" She took the change purse out of her pannier and regarded it critically.

"Are they likely to have anything like that here?" Lockheed said.

"Mr. Dime Shift said they had all sorts o' businesses and inventor exhibitions here," Applebloom said. "There's probably somepony with a hair care company somewhere." There certainly were a lot of exhibitions. Despite being far from capacity the midway was crowded with booths and displays; the fine arts shoulder to shoulder with the industrial, clever gadgets and exotic magic devices next to innovations in humble tools....She soon found herself half-forgetting her quest for a cutie mark gift in her fascination with the tools, inventions, and displays all around her. The staff and booth bunnies, bored with the early thin crowds, were eager to get her attention.

"...This, young miss, is a fountain pen," one enthusiastic young unicorn in a straw boater said, holding one of the display pens up. "Can even be used by earth ponies--- without getting ink in your mouth. Or getting a feather up your nose." He chuckled at his own joke. "Writes like a quill, but without the inky mess. Uses a metal nib, and stores the ink in a replaceable internal reservoir you activate by pressing that little lever..." he demonstrated, writing fluently with his mouth on a pad. "The pen itself outlasts a thousand quills."

"Nifty," Applebloom said, delighted. "Princess Twilight would eat these up. She goes through quills faster'n a porcupine covered in hair remover! Here, hold on--" she flipped open the compact mirror hanging around her neck. "Twilight Sparkle," she announced in a clear voice. The mirror fizzed for a second, and the face of Equestria's fourth most famous princess appeared.

"Hey Applebloom," the mirror said. "What's up?"

"Got a feller here with an in-vention you're gonna love," Applebloom said. She held up the mirror so Twilight could see the fountain-pen pony.

The youth's eyes went round. "P-princess Twilight?"

In five minutes the young inventor had a brand new contract with the throne for a thousand fountain pens, a lifetime supply of little ink refills and pen nibs, and the promise of a royal seal of approval on his product--- once Twilight had sampled a few herself. Applebloom left him alternating between filling out forms for a bulk shipment to Canterlot Castle and going into giddy hysterics.

"Well, you made his day," Lockheed noted. "And his fiscal year."

"...Strongest glue ever invented," the booth bunny chirped with a toothy smile. She held up the bottle for Applebloom to see, then pointed to the various ridiculously heavy objects behind her--- anvils, cast iron safes, wrecking balls-- dangling from a steel I-beam by a single drop of glue. "Sticks to anything! Wood, metal, glass, plastic..."

Applebloom squinted. "Then what's the bottle made out of?" She said suspiciously. "If it sticks to everything, then it shouldn't be able to come out of the bottle at all!"
The booth bunny's eyes glazed over. "Uhhhh...."

"Oh we've got op-por-tuni-tee
In this muni-ci-pali-tee..."

"Introducing the Super Fruity Squeezer 6000!!!
She didn't even need a second chorus. Or a second look. "GUAAAAAAAARDS!" Applebloom shrieked.

"Agh! Time to make our getaway, brother!"

"Floor it!!"

"...And as you can see, Sunflower Alchemical has been in the field of high quality potions and alchemical products for over a hundred and fifty years," the unicorn mare said, tossing her short-cropped black mane as she pointed out the array of bubbling beakers, tubes and burners arranged all around the company booth. "Using nothing but the highest quality equipment and state of the art facilities. Of course they are always recruiting; perhaps some of you will be working for us someday yourselves. We have brochures available for those wishing to apply..." she noticed a butter yellow filly with a ribbon in her mane in the front row. She was accompanied by a stern looking gryphon in Guard armor, and was waving a hoof at her. "Yes, little filly? Do you have a question?"

"Not really," Applebloom said. "I just thought I oughta tell you that brew you got going over there--" she pointed"-- is cooking at too high a temperature. And your assistant put way too much powdered pepperbloom in."

The mare's smile got strained. "Well, I'm sure our highly trained alchemists and potion makers know what they're doing better than an un-trained filly who hasn't even earned her cutie mark yet," she said with a patronizing laugh.

Applebloom shook her head. "It's just that Zecora always says you never let that mixture reach a boil--"

The booth mare's smile got even more condescending. "Zecora? Is that a zebra name?" she laughed louder, scoffing. "My dear filly, what Sunflower Alchemical does is way beyond what any tribal guru brews up in a cauldron over a wood fire. I have a degree in potioneering, and I assure you that I and my assistants know what they're doing."

Applebloom's eyebrows tabled and her eyes half-lidded. "Fine, whatever. Your funeral, lady. Let's go, Lockheed." She trotted off as the demo lady continued her spiel.

"Now what?" Lockheed muttered to Applebloom.

Applebloom kept right on walking. "Give it a sec," She said. "Three.... two...."

BOOM! green foam fountained into the air back the way they came.
"AAgh! My HAIR!!" Shrieks of outrage and dismay filled the air.

"Guess she got her potions degree at the school o' hard knocks," Applebloom said, not even looking back while her guard doubled over with laughter.

"...New seed drill, cuts planting time to a fraction..."

"...Self propelled plow...."

"...Refinement of the amniomorphic spell..."

"...Fifteen new shades of weather-resistant paint...."

"...New wonder material, nylon...."

"....fine potions ingredients for over fifty years..."

"...Our factory now produces a whole new selection of artificial flavorings for the aspiring candy maker, including pineapple, cherry, kiwi, snozzberry...."

"...Geodesic dome...."

"...magically powered tools for woodworking and carpentry...."

" Crystal Cube! Will NOT roll off the table, unlike the traditional outdated crystal ball..."

"... It's called airbrushing--- in skilled hooves produces marvelous artwork--- we have t-shirts for sale..."

"...These gorgeous black velvet paintings of Starswirl the Bearded..."

"...Rapid fire artillery for use in the Canterlot military..."

"...New strain of blight resistant potatoes, making over 800 new strains of potato, plums, prunes, berries, trees, and flowers

"...Latest in pest control...

That last one brought her up short. It hadn't been that long since her rather unpleasant dream where she'd been saddled with a pest-pony cutie mark, and this particular booth was triggering some memories. Standing in a collection of tools and gear of his trade was a tired-looking earth pony stallion with a striking resemblance to the pest control officer from her dream, explaining his trade to a couple of vaguely interested passersby.

Some sort of morbid curiosity drew Applebloom over. She perused the nets, sprays, and traps scattered over the counter. "Hey mister," she said. "Where's your Twittermite Gun?"

The pest pony, annoyed at the interruption, looked over at her in confusion. "My what?"

"Your Twittermite Gun," Applebloom repeated. "For sucking up twittermites." She sketched the rough shape out in the air with her hoof. "Had a bell barrel. an' a model 4 vacuum pump, an.... an you... don't know what I'm talkin' about," she finished, suddenly realizing with dawning embarrassment that she was describing a tool she'd only seen in a dream. She stammered to a halt. IT
was confusing; she could remember every detail of the bug gun, how the parts went together, everything. But it had never existed. "Ah don't suppose you've heard of twittermites, either," she said, resisting the urge to either facehoof or turn tail and run.

"Dunno, describe 'em," the pest pony said.

Applebloom rolled her eyes at herself. "Well, small, blue, glow in the dark, and they shoot off sparks... the farther apart the swarm flies, the bigger the zap they let off...?"

"hmn. Yer thinkin' of the fella in the next booth over," the bug pony said, pointing.

Applebloom turned to look and found herself nose to nose with a puce-colored earth pony stallion with an alarming grin and an even more alarming mint-white mane that stuck out around his head like a dandelion cloud. She let out a yelp and hopped backward. Totally unperturbed, the pony took her hoof in his and shook it so enthusiastically his lab coat flapped in the breeze. She caught a brief glimpse of a lightning bolt cutie mark. "Wattz is the name, Kilo Wattz! I happened to overhear, young filly, and I understand you're looking to learn about the energy source of the future?"

"P-l-e-a-s-e t-o m-e-e-t y-o-o-u," Applebloom stammered as his hoofshake rattled her molars.

"Hey, hoofs off!" Lockheed barked. He pushed the pony back with the butt of his spear. There was a loud crack and a flash of static electricity jumped from Kilo Watt's hair, up Lockheed's spear and into his gilded armor, knocking the gryphon back on his tail. He pulled off his helmet; his feathers stuck out around his head in every direction. He gave the inventor a glare.

"Oh terribly sorry," Kilo Wattz said. "I must have built up quite a static charge." Sparks danced around in his mane.

Applebloom looked at her hoof. "Why didn't you shock me?" she asked.

He held up a hoof. "Rubber hoofshoes," he said. "Anyway I heard you were asking about---"

Applebloom looked over his shoulder at his booth. "Twittermites!"

Indeed there was. Four enormous glass canisters with perforated lids stood there, each filed with a swarm of glowing, sparking insects so thick and bright it lit up the booth even in broad daylight. "Oh, is that what they're called?" Kilo Wattz said. "Where I come from, they're called Fizzing Whizbees. I've been breeding them ever since I found a few out on the edge of the Uberwald. They generate an amazing amount of highly stable electric current. Well, so long as you keep them from flying wild. Perfect for my experiments."

Briefly, Applebloom wondered where she'd heard about them to dream about them. "Experiments in what?"

"Why the power source of the future," he said. "BIO-ELECTRICITY!" His voice echoed and an enormous lightning bolt arced from one enormous Tesla coil behind him to another. "It's all around us, in living things great and small. The Fizzbees are only the most obvious example." He reached behind the counter and pulled up something that looked like a cross between a countertop appliance, a string of holiday lights, the inside of a radio and a garden spud. "Did you know that the common russet red potato can power a small clock or flashlight?" He clicked the lights on and off. "Well, with a little crossbreeding I've made a spud that can run a kitchen blender!" He flipped a switch and the blender whizzed to life.

"But that's nothing!" He tossed the contraption away; it landed somewhere with a crash. He hopped over the counter into the booth and caressed one of the glass cylinders lovingly. "With my
innovations in Fizzing Whizbee power, soon we'll be able to light every city in Equestria!"

Applebloom looked into the cylinders; they did sort of look like bees, actually. She wondered if they made honey. "Why glass jars?" she asked.

"Glass, like rubber, is nonconductive," Kilo Wattz said. "In fact one can build up a massive electrical charge and store it in a special glass container called a Leyden jar."

"But don't the Twitter-- I mean the Wizzbees have to spread out to make a bigger jolt of electricity?" Applebloom said.

Kilo Wattz held up a hoof. "Ah, a common misconception," he said. "Now, I assume you've learned in school about positive and negative charges?" Applebloom nodded. "Well now, Fizzing Wizzbees want to cluster together. But as you know, electricity happens when a massive negative charge of electrons builds up in one place, until the energy leaps from the negative charge to a similar positive charge elsewhere. As the Wizzbees steadily build up an electrical charge, they become more and more negatively charged---"

"Ohh, and they push each other away!" Applebloom said.

"Got it in one! So the trick isn't to let them spread out... it's to keep draining off that electrical charge as they produce it so that they don't." He pointed to two short rods attached to thick wires, sticking down through the lids of the cylinders. "These poles drain off the Wizzbees continually, keeping all these gadgets--" he waved at the rest of the booth, which was full of flashing, beeping, whirring electrical devices. "Powered and running... even then I have to let most of the charge ground out into the floor." He took a moment to admire his own display. "Truly the wave of the future--"

"Well that's fine," drawled a voice behind them, "If you don't mind dealing with all the problems." They turned around. Standing to one side was a muscular, heavy set stallion. He was was peach colored, with a brown mane, and was wearing coveralls, a red shirt with rolled up sleeves, a pair of tinted goggles and a bright yellow safety helmet. A utility belt stuffed with tools was strapped around his middle.

Kilo Watt's mood soured instantly. "Must you pester other pavilions?" he groused.

"What problems?" Applebloom asked him.

The pony shrugged in a casually friendly way. "Like feedin' the things. Or cleanin' out the dead ones. Or dealin' with the bug poop--"

"There are work arounds for those issues," Kilo Watt said frostily.

"Yep. But you shouldn't need 'em," the hard hatted pony said, his voice casual and mild. "Now don't get me wrong, this is all quite intellectually stimulatin' in its application of scientific innovation, but it's been my observation that ponykind's push has been to get away from dependin' on muscle power. Not that I know whether Fizzing Whizbees are flexin' anything to do what they do, but point made."

He leaned casually against a post.

Kilo Watt scoffed; electric sparks crackled in his mane. "As if you were blazing new trails in your devotion to steam power," he sneered. The hard hatted pony shrugged. Kilo Watt turned away and retreated into his mini-pavilion, sulking. "As if the wretched glory hog didn't have an overblown exhibition of his own to babysit," Applebloom heard him mutter as he disappeared through the curtain in the back.

"He don't seem to like you too much," she said soberly to the hard hatted pony. He gave another
"I would suppose that he would have a bit of a reason or two," he admitted. "My name's Red Fort, by the way." He extended a large hoof.

Applebloom shook it. "Applebloom," she said. "And what reasons?"

"By coincidence or design, it would seem my own exhibition is kind of overshadowing pritnear every other mechanical type contrivance in the Glass Palace," he said, pointing back to the center dome. Something enormous had just been rolled into place. Applebloom heard the blast of a whistle. Her eyes went round as she realized what she was seeing.

"We gotta see this!" she squealed, and galloped off, leaving Lockheed doing double-time to keep up.

She reached the center of the pavilion. She was right: it was a train engine. Not any train engine; this long steel beast was an enormous freight engine, the biggest she'd ever seen. It would eat the Friendship Express engine for a snack and not even burp. It had not one but two boilers. It towered nearly two stories high, all pistons and wheels and rivets and gleaming blue-black metal. It had been rolled into the pavilion on tracks laid down especially for it, and it now stood next to the bandstand, chugging contentedly. Applebloom could feel the thump of the engine through the bottoms of her hooves. Worker ponies were swarming over it like bees over a hive, poking and checking and resetting things, hanging decorative bunting from its sides.

Red Fort ambled up beside her as she looked on, enthralled. "The Thunderhead's quite a sight, ain't she?" he said. "My best work so far, I reckon."

"You built this?" Applebloom said, amazed.

"Designed her," he corrected. "Putting her together, well, I had a bit more help." He grinned suddenly. "Now... betcha can't guess what's so special about her."

Curious, Applebloom looked the iron beast over. There was something odd about the Thunderhead, but she couldn't place her hoof on-- "Wait. Where's the smoke stack??"

"Got it in one," Red Fort said. "The Thunderhead is the first steam train to not run on coal. Instead, it has a special magic rock inside called a Sun Stone. It draws power straight from the Sun-- sorta like Princess Celestia does-- and uses it to heat the boilers. No soot, no smoke, no coal car... just water and a sunshine siphoned straight from the sun." He tipped his hard hat back. "Means we can build her bigger, with a more powerful engine, too. The Thunderhead can probably haul twice as much cargo as a regular coal-burner her size. In a few years we could see every train in Equestria replaced with engines like her. Maybe even the world."

"Wow...." Applebloom thought it over. "But... won't that hurt the Sun if everypony's running their trains and stuff off it?"

Red Fort smiled. "Where do you think the energy in the coal comes from in the first place?" he said. "Everything in the world runs off the sun; The plants soak it up, and we eat the plants. Or the trees turn it into wood, the wood turns into coal, and then we burn it. This just skips a few steps. Besides the sun produces more energy every second than all the factories and engines and trains and boats and campfires in the world combined would produce in a year. We could put sunstones in every train on earth and it would be like drinking out of a lake with a sippy straw."

"Mind, sun stones have limitations. They have to be a certain size; you aren't gonna run your pocket watch off one. That's part of why the Thunderhead's so big. And it takes a real long time to make
one, and a lot of expensive alchemical ingredients. Still, it could make a lot of difference in the
world. Yep, a lot of difference."

He leaned on the railing around the exhibition and seemed to ponder things for a moment. Then he
looked down at Applebloom. "In the interests of full disclosure, I ought to let you know that I've
been watching you for a bit since you arrived."

"Is that so?" Lockheed said, a hint of warning in his voice. His tail lashed.

Red Fort gave him a half-grin. "Kinda hard not to. A little yellow filly being tailed by a full grown
gryphon in gilded battle armor does have a predilection for drawing the eye." Lockheed looked
mollified and backed down.

"Now, as I was indicating, you had a certain look in your eye," Red Fort went on. "Like you were
trying to find something."

"A gift for my cousin's Cuteceneara," Applebloom admitted.

Red Fort shook his head a little. "No, not that-- though I'm sure you were window shopping on the
side," he said. "You were looking for something more.

"I've been to a dozen of these things, and I've seen hundreds, maybe thousands of colts and fillies---
blank flanks like you-- with a certain look in their eye. You know, you just can't help but know,
they're looking for their cutie mark. Heck, I've seen more than a few get their cutie marks at one of
these shindigs. Sakes, 'S how I got mine, after all." He pointed to a logo on his coveralls; three gears
and a wrench.

"I watched you; you had that same look in your eye. You'd walk up to each booth and I could see
the wheel's turnin', like you were trying each one on for size in your head, to see how it fit.

"Then... you'd get this expression on your face that just about screamed: 'almost, but not quite.'
Carpenters, potion makers, architects, machinery--- it all got that same look from you." He turned his
gaze back to the Thunderhead. "I know, I had that same look myself, when I was your
age. Leastwise till I finally decided what it was I really was. That's the day I got my cutie mark."

"An' what did you decide what you were?" Applebloom asked.

"The same thing everypony here is, to one degree or another," he said. "What ol' Proud Lion there
was." He pointed. A statue was there, one that Applebloom had overlooked in her alarm at the statue
of Malfunziona; a stout limbed stallion in Neightalian garb. " Painting, sculpting, architecture,
science, music, mathematics, literature, anatomy, geology, astronomy, botany, writing,
history,cartography... he did it all.

"But none of those was what he was."

"What was he?" Applebloom said.

"What I am. I might be an engineer first, but above all, I'm an INVENTOR," he said. "That means I
solve problems. Not problems like 'what is Beauty,' mind.... because that would fall in the purview
of your conundrums of philosophy." He put his hard hat over his heart. "No... I solve practical
problems. That's what everypony here does. Whether they work with paints or chisels or carpenter's
tools or steel rivets. They fix things. Make them work better. And maybe once in a while bring
somethin' completely new into the world. At the end of the day, we're all in the same family." He
plunked his hard hat back down on his head. "A lotta fillies and colts are kind of scared of that.
Afraid that they'll 'just be a nerd,' or all be lumped in together with all the other gear-flanks out
Applebloom cringed. "I'm... sort of scared of that myself," she confessed. "I-- I belong to a club... the Cutie Mark Crusaders. I'm scared of just--- just bein' nothing more than that," she said, shamefaced.

Red Fort nodded. "I suspect I can understand that," he said. "But look at me and Kilo Wattz, back there. Do we even seem remotely alike?"

Applebloom giggled. "Not hardly," she said.

"Got that right," he said. "We're both inventors. Both engineers even. But we couldn't be more different if one of us had flippers."

Applebloom cocked her head. "D'you think I could be an engineer?"

He seemed to think it over. "You certainly got the spark, and that bump of curiosity about everything. Or you could be one of anything that caught your interest out there. Whatever you end up pickin', though, you might take Proud Lion's example. Him, he was an inventor, and an engineer, and a sculptor, and a painter, and a writer--- if there was some way out there to make thing and create new ideas, he tried his hoof at it. Didn't matter to him what his cutie mark was, or wasn't. Don't let anything tell you what you aren't. You own your cutie mark; Your cutie mark don't own you."

"It's been a treat talking to you, Duchess," he said. "But I got to get back to work..." With that, he sauntered off.

"Huh." Applebloom watched him go, a thoughtful expression on her face. A minute later Babs came running around the side of the Thunderhead, Grunt the diamond dog huffing and puffing along behind.

"Hey, Applebloom!" She shouted. "Can you believe the SIZE of this thing?" She skidded to a halt next to her cousin.

"Yup, she's a humdinger all right," Applebloom agreed. It was then that she noticed the ticking. She cocked an ear. "D'you hear that?"

Babs listened. "Yeah, it's coming from somewhere nearby. Sounds like... I dunno, like someone rapping on stone?"

The two guards, curious, pricked their own ears. "It's coming from the statue," Grunt said, his floppy ears pricking forward. Lockheed hefted his spear and crept toward the statue of Malfunziona. "No no," Grunt corrected him. "other statue."

He pointed at the statue of Bold Lion.

The two guards crept forward, the fillies-- despite their hissed protests-- at their heels. The irregular rapping was loud now, and was coming from the marble base of the neightalian statue. It sounded, most clearly, like something was trying to get out. Hesitantly, Applebloom crept forward and placed her hoof against the stone pedestal.

With a loud CRACK! A rectangular section of marble under her hoof broke loose and fell away. All of them jumped backward.

"I didn't do it! I didn't do nothing!" Applebloom panicked.

Before any of them could say anything one way or the other, a bronze cylinder, as thick around as a
Applebloom watched in growing horror, the lid of the cylinder slowly unscrewed and fell off. Something crawled out. "Yesss... Freeeeeeee!" it hissed.

It was scrawny, and barely tall as she was when it stood erect. It was translucent, almost invisible. But there was no mistaking the figure, its crooked torso, its overjointed limbs, its flared-nostril glare of hate. "Malfunziona!

The creature didn't even give them a second glance. It glared around at the teeming Glass Palace, at the pavilions all around it, and it leered evilly, its smirk spreading up its snout. "Yes, so many things," it said. "Gears and pulleys and levers and axles, switches and buttons, so many--- so many things to break!"

It didn't even give them a second look before it scurried over to the Thunderhead. Climbed high up its iron flank, seized one of the enormous bolts in its crooked monkey paws and began twisting at it as if it intended to dismantle the entire engine by hand.

"Hey!" Applebloom shouted. "Cut that out!"

"Yeah, geddoffa that!" Babs shouted, chucking a candied apple at it. The Guards' two spears followed the fairway treat as well. They missed by inches, clanging off the iron flanks of the engine and scaring the hell out of some passersby.

Malfunziona gave up its futile tugging to glare at them and hiss. It ignored their further shouts and imprecations. "No, no," he said to noone in particular. "It's too big, too complicated. I'm still too weak! I need to start... smaller." The imp looked around, scanning. From its heightened perch it could now look out over the whole of the great pavilion. Its eyes gleamed evilly.

"Yesss," it said. "More things. I hear pumps and valves, feel springs and coils, smell lubricants and glues--" it paused to sniff. "Electricity..."

Cackling, it dove off the Thunderhead. It turned into a tangled streak of smoke and zipped off in a zigzag across the great rotunda. Where it passed balloons popped, stitches unraveled, knick-knacks cracked or popped apart. A cotton-candy cart spun itself to oblivion, flinging parts of itself in every direction; a hurdy-gurdy exploded in a shower of screws and springs. He vanished from sight in the growing throng.

"We gotta catch him!" Applebloom wailed.

"Stay here with Grunt," Lockheed said. "I'll alert the Princess--" he started to go aloft.

"No wait!" Babs shouted. Lockheed stopped and hovered. "We'll alert the Princess!" she said, holding up her magic compact.

"Dang," he cussed, I keep forgetting those. Fine, tell her, I'll scout for that little freak--"

"Split up and take us with you!" Applebloom said, holding up her own compact. "Grunt with Babs, you with me! We'll cover more area and we'll be able to stay in communication with each other!"

"Hah! Smart Pony is Smart!" Grunt barked. "We go South wing-- You go North!" Deed followed word and Babs and Grunt ran off. Applebloom didn't waste another second. She cracked open her compact and shouted into the mirror.

"Applejack! Applejack! We're all in BIG TROUBLE!"
Chapter 38

Applejack was meeting with the staff of the Expo in the Glass Palace's office wing when her compact began buzzing and chiming like it had gone mad. "Pardon me, everypony," she said to the table full of businessponies. "I'll be just a moment." She cracked open the compact and looked into the mirror. "Yes, who is it?"

"I SWEAR WE DIDN'T DO IT, APPLEJACK!" the mirror screeched in Applebloom's voice. Several of the ponies nearby nearly jumped out of their suits at the sudden shout. Applejack hastily covered the mirror with a hoof, trying to muffle the continued shouting. In a brief pause in the torrent she said "Applebloom, stop yellin' I'm right here! Now slow down and tell me what's wrong?"

The volume dropped several notches as the filly repeated herself, giving Applejack a breakdown of what happened. Once Applejack had the gist of it, she felt the blood drain from her face. "Maker save us all," she breathed. "Another one!" She looked down the table at everypony. "Ladies and gentleponies, you might want to rustle up your security and get them on the move," she said. "We might have us a situation!"

"What kind of a situation?" a portly mustachioed stallion halfway down the table asked in alarm. "I gotta patch through to Celestia to be sure," Applejack said. "But it looks like we got us another draconequus on the loose!"

Celestia was enjoying a brief hour or two of respite. She was lounging on her divan on the balcony while one of her guard-- a thestral who had transferred to the day watch-- massaged her hooves. "Oof," she murmured. "Right there, Duskfall... blast, my frogs have been aching these past few..." Her compact rang. "Hm, what might this be?" she said. She pulled it out and flipped it open.

"Dog gone it Celestia," Applejack's open-country voice bellowed from the mirror, "haven't you ever heard of an ordinary JAIL?"

"Wait, What? Who?" Celestia said in shock. This had to be something serious indeed, for Applejack of all ponies to be shouting at her like this.

"One of your ding-donged time-release troublemakers just popped his cork, that's what!" Applejack said. "I'm down in the middle of the Glass Palace, lookin' at the statue he escaped from right now!" The mirror swiveled, showing a neightalian statue of Bold Lion with a rather sizable hole in its base. "There's a single-serving size draconequus running around the Expo right now, doing Maker knows what to Maker knows what!"

"I don't understand," Celestia said, perplexed. "I didn't imprison any other Draconequi."

"What??"

"I didn't know there were any other Draconequi. Are you certain it was--"

"Babs an' Applebloom saw him escape, an' except for bein' knee high to a grasshopper they said he
was the spittin' image of THIS jasper." The mirror's image swiveled again, revealing an extraordinarily ugly statue standing in prominence off to one side.

"I can understand the mistake," Celestia murmured. "He's certainly odd-looking enough--"

"I choose to take that personally," a voice behind her huffed. Celestia started and looked behind her. Discord was hovering behind her, his arm crossed and sulking. Celestia rolled her eyes and chose to ignore him.

"But I assure you I have no recollection of this creature," she finished saying. "And certainly not of imprisoning it in a neightalian statue of Bold Lion..."

"Wait, let me see that." Discord reached over her shoulder and plucked the compact out of the air. "Turn that thing around so we can see-- aha! Oh, him! Hah! Long time no see..."

"You know this 'Malfunziona?' " Celestia said. "Discord," she said, a warning tone in her voice. "What is your connection to this creature?"

"He's one of my cousins," Discord said disdainfully. "A lesser cousin, I might add. Totally small potatoes. The runt of the litter, at least back when I ruled." he tossed the compact over his shoulder, forcing Celestia to snatch it out of the air.

"Lesser Draconequus?" Celestia queried.

"Of course, that was why he was such small potatoes," Discord snorted. "I'm a Chaos entity, I get more powerful the more chaos I cause, in general. But Malfy was a lesser, which meant he was a specialist. He specialized in causing breakdowns in things like architecture, machinery, that sort of thing.

"How come I never heard of him? He sounds like a thoroughly dangerous entity."

"How would he be? What chaos could he cause back in Equestria 500 years ago?" Discord snorted. "Make a loom tangle? A spinning wheel or two break down? In fact that's probably why he stayed so puny... and why you ponies are lagging so far behind technology wise. Any time you built anything more complex than a wagon wheel, he was there, sneaking around, making it break down... making you mistrustful of progress and invention. He obviously kept it up long after I was made to drink from the Harmony Rainbow Riot Hose." He smirked at Celestia. "It's rather amusing, actually... you imprisoned me, defeated Sombra, even banished your little sister--- but never even noticed the little menace who was actually keeping your little ponies stuck in the dark ages."

"So how'd he end up in a neightalian statue in the middle of the Expo?" Applejack demanded to know.

Discord snapped his fingers. A mortarboard appeared on his head and an enormous tome entitled "Ye History of Ye Worlde" appeared in his paw. "If I were to wager a guess," he said, flipping through the book backwards, letting several centerfolds fall out, "the little twerp got bored making iron ploughs rust and flew off to Neightaly to cause grief for this Bold Lion fellow. Hey, world's greatest historical inventor, his workshop was probably like a catnip mouse to Malfunziona. He cheesed Bold Lion off, and unfortunately for him Bold Lion was clever enough to figure out how to imprison him and stick him inside that statue. Any moderately competent unicorn could probably do it."

"Oh dear," Celestia said. "I'm starting to remember... Bold Lion writing me a letter about having 'subdued the spirit of disorder' or some such. I thought he was just being poetic again." She rubbed
her chin. "The only thing I can't figure is why he chose to hide the canister inside a statue of himself?"

"Because he figured nopony would ever move it?" Discord suggested. "After all, it's not like anypony was going to buy a selfie." He whipped out a camera, pointed it at himself, and took several photos of himself making faces.

"Or more likely, because it was supposed to be over Bold Lion's tombstone," the batpony massaging Celestia's hooves said. At Celestia and Discord's stare he said "I studied Renaissance artists in school. Bold Lion carved that statue to stand over his own grave."

"Which would have meant that the statue would remain undisturbed out of respect," Celestia mused. "While the statue of Malfunziona would have been a red herring for anyone seeking to release the chaos spirit. Clever stallion; Bold Lion always did love multi-layered tricks like that. Have you evacuated the building yet?" Celestia asked the mirror.

"No, we're keepin' it on the lowdown," Applejack replied. "I got mah Roughnecks an' the convention security sittin' through, keepin' an eye out for the little booger. We didn't want to risk a panic, or him escapin' when everyone started pouring out of the Expo..."

"Wait, did you say Expo?" Discord said.

"Yeah, it's the annual Trade Expo in Baltimare," Applejack said. "This one's pretty big, it's a warmup for the World's Fair next year--"

"Ohhhhh dear," Discord said. He looked a bit green.

"What? What??"

"I told you already, Malfunziona specializes in architecture and machinery," Discord snapped. "But up until this point he hasn't wreaked havoc on anything more complex than a wooden clock. But this Expo, I've heard about them--- it's choc a block with more cutting-edge technology and inventions than all of Equestria had in the thousand years prior combined. He is going to get very powerful, very fast." He looked sick. "He'll probably be as powerful as me at my peak in a matter of hours."

"And if he gets out into the city...." Celestia had visions of the factories, buildings, streets full of vehicles, stores full of consumer gadgets and households full of appliances in Baltimare feeding this monster to power beyond reason.

"He'll get powerful enough to knock you all back down to the stone age," Discord finished for her, waving a wooden club and sporting a Fred Flintstone outfit.

"Applejack! Have you learned to cast a sealing spell yet?" Celestia asked.

"Ah, yeah, just the magical kindy-garten type..."

"That doesn't matter for now. For now, cast it on the Glass Palace itself. Pour everything you have into it. That will keep Malfunziona from escaping... at least for a while."

"Ponies might panic if they find out they're trapped."

"It won't matter if you don't trap Malfunziona before he gains much more power," Discord said dryly. "You've got maybe an hour, I figure, before he's too powerful for you to stop alone."

"I'll send out a message to Baltimare's city Thaumaturgy office," Celestia said. "They'll be out there
with a Logic Trap. It will hold a weakened draconequus, at least, till we can secure him more permanently. Till then you have to corner him, \textit{and you have to keep him from escaping the Palace.}"

"Great, no pressure then," Applejack said grimly. "All right, I'll get this shindig started. Uh, over an' out, I guess." She snapped the compact shut. "all right fellers, here's what we got to do. Dime Shift, have security lock all the gates. And tell the maintenance staff to put up signs and barricades... label 'em 'under repair' or 'wet cement' or somethin'. That'll keep ponies from askin' too many questions, at least for an hour or so."

"Good thinking, your Highness!" Dime Shift said.

"Shut down everything powered. Pass the word around to the folks runnin' demos. Have 'em shut down anything they got runnin', mebbe even dismantle 'em if they can. The less this jasper has to break down, the less he'll have to feed on."

"Not all of them can just shut down--"

"Well it'll have to do," Applejack said. "Git some entertainment going-- put a band out on the floor. Pay the vendors to pass out free drinks and snacks, too; it'll help keep people from getting agitated."

"And we'll be able to shut down the ovens and the freezers too," somepony said. "If anyone asks, blame it on a power failure or the like. In fact make that the cover for why all the lights and what not are out."

It's going to get stuffy in here soon," someone worried.

"Git some weather ponies in the air, have 'em make some cloudcover. Heck, make it rain indoors, have 'em put on a weather demo for the folks. Dang, wish Rainbow Dash was here..."

"And Malfunziona?"

"Send security out in groups of two or three, have at least one unicorn in every group. I'm told an average unicorn is good enough to keep him pinned--- so long as he's still weak. You boys find him, We'll come runnin' with that bronze cylinder; I reckon I kin stuff him back in his can when we catch him. We only got an hour, so let's get a move on.

"Well, what're you all waitin' for? Git!" Ponies galloped off or took to the air.

"And what will you do, Highness?" Grey Wolf, the commander of her Roughnecks, asked.

"I'm gonna be busy makin' sure this overgrown glass jar don't leak," she said. She trotted to the center of the roundabout, pointed her horn at the peak of the dome, and fired. A stream of orange light shot from her horn to strike the glittering dome; it spread down over the crystal-and-steel walls, illuminating the Glass Palace from top to bottom and end to end before it faded away. Applejack took a seat, her horn still glowing and her eyes fixed on the ceiling. "Hurry up, everypony," she muttered. "We ain't got much time..."

Maybe even less time than she'd thought; already, she could hear shouts of alarm, and things breaking in the distance.

---

Applebloom was not a happy camper. Everypony was going to blame the Cutie Mark Crusaders, namely HER, for everything. Again. She just knew it. She had to catch that Malfunziona rascal, or
there'd be no hearin' the end of it!

She galloped along in the direction she'd last seen the wisp of cloud flee, Lockheed flying escort overhead. The lights in the palace went out; was that him at work already? She passed several pavilions that looked like they'd already had a run-in; she saw workers scratching their heads in bafflement over suddenly stilled machines, and at least one or two where smoke and sparks were leaping out. An enormous mobile sculpture made of dozens of enormous turning gears suddenly jumped off all its axles and fell apart, sending wagon-wheel sized cogs and sprockets rolling down the midway, ponies dodging and scattering in every direction.

The Glass Palace was an enormous dome, with two vaulted hallways branching off it, North and South. Those went on a few hundred yards and then branched again, east and west, and then each branch ended in a dome of its own. Applebloom followed the trail of increasing damage and exasperated inventors to the Northeast dome. Malfunziona was there. He had already grown to the size of a large dog, and was banging on the glass of the dome in frustration. Applebloom sighed in relief; for whatever reason he couldn't escape the Palace.

"Applejack, Babs, we found 'im!" Applebloom shouted into her compact. "He's in the Northeast dome, and he-- wuh oh." The angry draconequus had heard her. He wheeled on her with a hiss. "You again!" he said. "I don't know why you follow me, tu piccola peste--"

Lockheed didn't wait for him to finish. The gryphon divebombed at the draconequus, talons outstretched. They only closed on empty air; Malfunziona dissolved into smoke before he closed the distance. He reappeared, hovering high in the dome as Lockheed smacked into the glass with a painful thwack.

"Found me already? Keeping me from leaving? Well, it looks like I'm going to have to up my game if I want to keep enjoying my freedom, hmm?" he said as Lockheed slid stunned to the ground. "I've already gotten tanto caos from just la mia piccola gita down the length of this building! Maybe it's time I spread out the workload, eh?..." He snapped his crooked fingers, and suddenly there were three of him. With a mad cackle they shot off in every direction.

"Oh, no," Applebloom moaned.

The Southeast dome was where most of the more agricultural exhibits were located. There wasn't much in the way of technology or machinery there-- most of the displays were of new strains of seed or breeds of farm animal-- but nopony was taking any chances. Omari, Appleseed, and Growf (Grunt's brother) had been sent there with one of the Roughneck's unicorns to make sure any live machinery was shut down.

"Typical. Send the farm pony out to check the livestock," Appleseed said as he looked over the animal cages. There were pens and cages full of ducks, chickens, piglets, amphibians, insects, even several varieties of rodents for some reason. "Like I can't handle anything more complicated than checkin' on cages of animals. I'm bein' stereotyped, here..."

Omari grunted. "Keep talking, farmboy. I swear, you ponies take a look at a striped face and you think he's fresh from the jungle."

"Whaddy'awl mean 'you ponies?' Ya racist barber pole," Appleseed snorted. Omari chuckled, amused.
"Do you two always squabble like this?" the black-and-white unicorn with them said irritably as he magically scanned the room. They looked at one another.

"Meh..."

"Yeah, pretty much..."

"On average yeah."

He said nothing, just half-lidded his eyes and kept scanning.

"Ponies flap mouths too much," Growf grumbled. "Nose to ground, ears open. Statue monster could be here." It was a constant source of vexation to the scholarly diamond dog that ponies constantly estimated his intelligence as slightly above that of a stapler. As if it was his fault that the canid tongue, palate and jaw weren't shaped to properly pronounce half the words in common Equestrian. He snuffed the air carefully. Gah, too many farm animals. Not that he was sure the scent he'd picked up at the statue wasn't just that of powdered marble...

"Eh, no machines in here for him to mess with, and he doesn't have magic that affects animals, they said," Appleseed said. "We should be good."

Unfortunately for Appleseed and his compatriots, while Malfunziona knew he would gain nothing from throwing mere animals and plants into chaos, he did however grasp the concept of force multipliers and dividing enemy forces. A rotunda full of temperamental livestock fit the bill....and the latches on cages counted as mechanical devices. A crooked, zigzag shadow zipped in behind them and, with a throaty giggle, snapped its fingers.

The Roughnecks froze as every gate, cage door, and terrarium around them lid popped open. They watched in dawning horror as a lit string of firecrackers sailed into the middle of the room. Omari summed it up for all of them.

"Oh, BUCK."

The dome exploded in shrieking, squalling, squawking, quacking, feathers and hair.

"THE FROGS, THE FROGS!"

"I'M BIT! AIEE!"

"SQUIRRELS! AAAAGH! GEDDEMOFF GEDDEMOFF! WHO THE HELL BREEDS SQUIRRELS??"

"WATCH OUT FOR THE GEESE!"

"THE GRASSHOPPERS ARE LOO-- AAACK-- PHTOOEY!"

"SQUIRRELS! ROWF! SQUIRRELS! SQUIRRELS! ROWF!"

"QUIT CHASING THOSE SQUIRRELS AND HELP ME WITH THESE!"

"MAYDAY, MAYDAY, CALLING FOR BACKUP!"

The Nightshade triplets were in the Northeast dome, swooping in and out among the aircraft hanging
on display there. They were supervising as the staff lowered a half dozen experimental flying machines from the ceiling, while their unicorn backup, LimeBerry and Snap Shot, patrolled below, scanning for the escaped draconequus and standing ready with a bubble-trap spell.

"Hustle, ponies, hustle!" the sister of the trio shouted as she circled the pegasus workers. "We need those things on the ground, not dangling a hundred feet over ponies' heads."

"Ease up lady," one of them griped. "We're working as fast as we can!"

"Work faster," her brother snapped. His bat-fanged scowl made the worker gulp. "We've got a magic-using saboteur loose in the pavilion, and we need the displays shut down and secured. He could sabotage this setup with a snap of his---" he paused as he realized that he could hear a fanblade going and could feel a breeze. "Tartarus, who went and turned the ventilation fans back on--"

There was a cough and a roar. He looked behind him, saw smoke and sparks coming from the engine of one of the nearby ornithopters. Then the autogyro next to it rumbled to life. Panicked workers scattered.

"Oh. Never mind then..." He thought. Then the guy lines snapped.

Babs galloped along as fast as her stubby foal legs would take her. All around her lightbulbs were popping-- whether they were on or off-- and gadgets were randomly flying apart. "Ahh, horseapples, he's upped his game!" she said. She tried to run faster.

Grunt chugged along behind her. "Make way for Pony! Make way for Pony! ...Pony, slow down for Grunt!" he shouted between pants. His tongue was lolling out of his mouth in distress. Little pug legs were not made for long distance races, and the bangs, whistles and screeches all around were setting off every doggy panic nerve he had.

To his surprise she granted his request and screeched to a halt. They were halfway down the South hall, where a row of potionmakers and alchemical companies had set up their wares. There were sounds of a tumult up ahead; ponies were running AWAY from it at speed. Babs noticed that the path was littered with tubes, jars and bottles. She stopped and picked a few up to read the label. "Shampoo? hair gel? Whoa. Mane and Tail ultra-perm conditioner." She grabbed a canvas bag, threw the strap around her shoulder and started gathering things up.

"What you doing?" Grunt yowled in exasperation.

"Are you kiddin'? Dis stuff is QUALITY." She bagged a couple jars of mane dye.

A moment later several large, shaggy somethings galloped past, screaming in terror. "Da hay?"
Babs stomped on the last one's tail, bringing it to a yelping halt.

"AaAh! Help! Run away!" it shouted.

Babs carefully parted the mass of hair till a face peeped out. Underneath the massive tangle of mane hair was a pony. "Da heck is dis?"

"Something went wrong up at the Mane and Tail display!" he said. "They were showing how their new hair growth tonic was made and the mixer just... exploded! Undiluted tonic everywhere! Everyone's manes started growing out of control! And then the Indie Alchemy Labs booth right next door had a leak and... it's horrible, just horrible!"
There was a roar from up ahead. The terrified pony hobbled to his hooves and galloped for his life. "Run away! Run away!"

"Fat lotta good DAT would do," Babs growled and charged onward.

"Still sound like better plan than this!" Grunt yowped, but he followed.

They got clear of the last of the runners and skidded to a halt.

"Gedda load o' dat," Babs gaped.

Not fifty feet ahead, recognizable by the giant steel scissors and comb on the banner, stood the Mane and Tail display booth. Standing in the middle of it, raging and roaring and rapidly reducing what was left of the booth to splinters, was an enormous tangled mat of hair. There were ponies embedded in it, stuck to it by their overgrown manes, screaming in terror and yelling for help. Several Roughnecks and a handful of staff security had the thing surrounded and were jabbing at it with swords and spears, to no effect. A second later a pony with smoking hair and pockets full of test tubes went running past, cackling "It's alive! It's alive! They said my Vitality formula was rubbish, but now they'll all see!---

"We gotta rescue those ponies!" Babs said.

"How we suppose to fight THAT thing??" Grunt said. "What we gonna use to fight a giant ball of--"

The roaring beast flailed with its matted fists. The crumbling booth exploded, splintered wood and bent steel shelving flying in every direction. There was a whirring noise, and the giant novelty scissors from the booth's banner, easily as tall as Babs was long from nose to tail, embedded themselves with a THWANG! point first in the floor. They stood there in front of her, proud and gleaming as Excalibur.

Babs gaped for a moment, then gave Grunt a smug smirk. "My," she said. "What an amazin' coincidence--"

Omari and his group stood in the Northeast pavilion, back to back, beating a slow retreat behind their shields. "We need something to subdue these animals!" Omari shouted.

"Like what??" Appleseed shouted.

"Like tear gas! Or-- I don't know!" Omari shouted back as an enraged chicken bounced off his shield. "Tranquilizers or something!"

"Did you say tranquilizers?"

"That sounds like our cue, brother!"

Omari looked behind them. They had backed up to a small, but well-built and rather razzle-dazzle looking booth and table on--- unfortunately--- the far side of the roundabout from the exit. Crouched behind the overturned table were two unicorn stallions with freckles and bright red hair. The only way to tell them apart was one seemed to be missing most of his right ear. They gave him disarming-- or perhaps alarming, considering the circumstances-- grins. "Hello, officers! We're the Weasel brothers. He's Gred--" the first one said, pointing to the other.
"--And he's Forge," said the other. "Of Farm and Family Friendly Research Pharmaceuticals"

"--Or FFFRP, for short."

"--Formerly Weasel's Wheezes," came the explanation,"However any company by that name was banned from the convention due to a misunderstanding some years ago--"

"Something about our Balloon Bon Bons and the director's wife getting stuck in the top of the pavilion dome for six hours," Forge said, pausing to fend off a charging gaggle of ducks with an umbrella. "Not our fault the woman's such a pig-- the label clearly states not to consume more than a dozen in one sitting--"

"But a name change seemed political," his brother said. "Unfortunately putting "farm" in the name of our company's new subdivision led to us being put in here."

The guards began questioning the wisdom of enlisting the aid of two ponies whose business' name was the sound effect for a loud fart. "Wait, Weasel family?" Appleseed said. "Ain't you-- ack!" he had to push back a panicking pig. "Ain't you them fellas that raise ferrets for pest control??"

"That would be the jolly old family business. It's run by our older brother, over there," Gred pointed. Across the way a slightly balding, redheaded pony with a fang earring was perched atop a stack of cages. He was covered in scratches and bites and was surrounded by a mob of weasels, stoats and ferrets with obvious evil on their mind. They were using their little paws to shake the stack of crates, making it sway alarmingly.

"I told mother raising dragons would be safer!!" he yelled.

"Understandably we decided to blaze our own trail, as it were," Forge said.

"You said you could help?" Growf said.

"Indeed, we have something that might quellish things--"

"But we've been too busy fending for our lives to get it out--"

"If you could cover for us--"

"Deal!" Omari barked. "Roughnecks, give these two a phalanx!" The four of them locked shields and stood their ground. Behind them the Weasel twins dove into some frantic activity as birds and beasts rattled claws and hooves on their shields. After several tense minutes, Gred (or was it Forge?) tapped Omari and Appleseed on the shoulder. "Hold these," they both said, handing each of them the end of a bungie cord.

"What is this?" Appleseed said. The bungie went taut; he looked over his shoulder to see the brothers pulling a bucket back as far as the cords through its handles would stretch.

"Delivery system," Gred and Forge said, and they released.

The bucket shot over their heads, launching a water balloon full of something up into the rafters. It struck the highest point in the dome and burst, spraying a liquid in every direction that rapidly evaporated into a silvery cloud that sifted down over the room. "Here, eat these," Gred said, pressing an after dinner mint on each of them.

"These?" Growf said, chomping.
"Antidote," Forge said. "for our Desperation Dinner Ditching Drops. Let's say you're in the middle of a potentially disastrous dining situation--"

"Hearthwarming family dinner," Gred suggested. "When all those cousins you barely know and that uncle you can't stand all show up..."

"When it looks like the traditional enormous family row is about to break out, you eat one of the yellow mints, drop one of the green mints in your drink---" the invisible vapors descended, and birds, mammals, and amphibians alike teetered about, blinked groggily, and then flopped down where they were and began snoring loudly. "--you flee to safety while everyone else has a nice long after-dinner nap."

In a matter of moments, all the animals (and a number of ponies) were conked out on the floor, peaceful as lambs.

"Nice work, gentleponies," Omari said. He got a calculating look in his eye as he considered the results before him. "We'll want to contact you after this crisis is over--"

Gred smiled and held out a stapled brochure. "Our catalog," he said.

The Nightshade triplets were having a bit of a rough go of it. They'd managed to cut down all the hanging aircraft but three. The autogyro had flipped, dove straight down and crashed; the ornithopter had, in a moment of ironic apropos, flown out to the end of its tether, flapped its way around in a wide circle, and dashed itself beak first into the glass and steel windows of the dome. The prototype biplane, on the other hand, had not been so cooperatively suicidal. Ironically it had been built with a self-stabilizing gyroscopic system that enabled it to fly even without a pilot. Malfunziona's hex had fried the off-switch so it was stuck in "on" and froze the throttle wide open, so it was now doing its mechanical damnedest to gain altitude and speed and fly in a straight line... regardless of any architecture that should coincidentally be in the way.

The triplets, for their part, were doing their damnedest to make sure it didn't. Foxfire was clinging to one ribbed, batlike upper wing, his brother Frost was clinging to the other, and their sister Moonpenny was hunched down in the cockpit, wrestling with the less than responsive controls.

"What idiot filled the tank before putting this thing on display?" she screeched, yanking at the yoke.

"They didn't, they had to fly the thing here!" Frost screeched back. "It must have had a gallon or two left over!"

"What do we do? We can't land this thing!!" Moonpenny shrieked over the redlining motor. "It'll just lawnmower its way down the Midway!"

Foxfire shuddered in horror at the mental image. "We'll have to fly it back and forth till it runs out of gas!" he shouted. He hung on for dear life as the plane swerved to avoid a hanging sign. "Ditch it into the reflecting pool down the middle of the South wing!"

"Sounds like a plan!" Frost shouted.

"Except for one thing," Moonpenny shrieked. "I don't know how to fly this thing!" She was acutely aware of the irony that she, a natural born flying creature, was about to die in a horrible crash.

"Aw c'mon, we're batponies! We can fly ourselves! How hard could it be?" Frost yelled, laughing in panic.
AAAAH, Hard right, hard right! Pull your aileron up!

What?

The flappy thing!

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!!"

Lockheed had been stunned silly. Applebloom had no choice; she roped one of the convention staff into looking after him and had galloped off to look for the Draconequus. She could hear the growing mayhem scattered throughout the Glass Palace. But she thought she had Malfunzio figured out. The more malfunctions he caused, the more powerful he grew. And the fastest way he could cause a LOT of malfunctions really fast...

She skidded to a halt in front of Kilo Wattz's booth. "Mr. Kilo Wattz!" she shouted. "You gotta shut everything down!"

Kilo Wattz was examining something that looked like a potato-powered table fan. "Shut down, what, why?" he asked.

"Malfunzio," Applebloom panted. "He's back. He's real. He's causin' chaos up an' down the pavilion--" a flying machine covered in screaming batponies roared by overhead. Applebloom ducked, and went on. "An' the more damage he causes, the more powerful he gets! If he gets to your electrical doodads--"

"Really?? Great Scott! I'd better disconnect everything--" Kilo Wattz hastily unplugged the potato from his fan. He began disconnecting leads and unplugging plugs. For an added measure of security he started eating the potato.

"But the Fizzing Whizbees..." Applebloom said, pointing to the glowing glass cylinders.

Kilo Wattz threw his hooves wide in bafflement. "What can I do about them? I can't just... switch them off!"

Applebloom felt awful for saying it, but this was dire. "You gotta fumigate 'em," she said.

"Are you nuts?" said the insect pony in the neighboring booth. "No can do! Bug spray is FLAMMABLE."

"Oh boy, now what?" Applebloom said.

"Oh no need to worry about that," said a voice overhead. "I'll be taking that problem off your hooves." They all looked up. Circling overhead like a crooked-backed chinese dragon was Malfunzio. He was at least eight feet long now... not counting how his crooked spine bent at right angles. "Oh, my applause to the little filly," he said in a heavy neightalian accent, clapping his mangled paws together. "She figured it out. Ben fatto, il mio piccolo."

"Figured what out?" Kilo Wattz said, scowling.

"Ah, it is quite simple," the draconequus sneered. "While I am a chaos being, I am... somewhat limited. I cannot play with your little toys, I can only break them. And my powers, I have no direct power over living things-- and thus I gain nothing from them." His eyes glittered wickedly. "But oh,
your *api elettrici*, your little 'fizzing whizbees,' they are, how you say, a loophole. The lightning they produce, oh, it does such wonderful things to your fragile creations..."

He snapped his fingers. the four cylinders rose into the air, shook violently, and then popped their lids. Four swarms of Fizzing Whizbees, enraged at such rough handling, swarmed out, and began immediately spreading as their anger-fueled agitation made their charge grow. "And after all," Malfunzio shouted over the growing buzz of the furious insects, "Am I not the original 'bug in the system?' With a whoop of laughter he twisted double and disappeared.


Applebloom yelped in pain as several of the bugs zapped her across the back and flank. She swatted at them only to get her hooves lightning stung for her trouble. She dove under the table with Kilo Wattz. "How do we stop them?" she cried.

"How should I know? I spent three days in the burn ward after I caught them! Why do you think I kept them in jars? Yowp!" he banged his head as he got stung again. "Get out of here! Run for it! I'll try to hold them off--- though I... haven't got a clue what to do--"

Applebloom felt a chill run down her like ice water. She could see it, clear as day. "I know what to do," she said. She reached over and grabbed the half-eaten potato out of his hooves and stuffed it in her pannier.

"What?"

"Nevermind, too long to explain! On three-- one-- two--"

The two of them rolled out from under the table. Kilo Wattz grabbed the cloth off his table and began flailing it about, yelling mindlessly. Applebloom ran. She ran around, under, and over displays and tables, trying to make distance. She didn't get much; it only took a moment for a sizable swarm to break away from the main body and zoom after her. They trailed after her, zapping and biting.

At least nopony was in her way; the conventioneers and attendees were scattering like the Windigo horde was descending on them. The swarm after her lagged behind, distracted by screaming shouting ponies who foolishly flailed at them with tablecloths, clipboards, bare hooves, or worse tried to spray them with water, which only got them shocked. the Whizbees quite willingly stopped at these assaults to vent their ire on their would-be assailant, broadening Applebloom's lead.

Her first stop was a Helping Hoof tool booth. She clambered over the racks, snagging a Swiss army knife and-- lucky break!-- a roll of duct tape. A run and leap and she was racing across the tabletops of a Super Turbine vacuum cleaner display. "Sorry, gotta borrow this!" She snatched the latest model out of the cowering booth worker's hooves. She dove under the far curtain and rolled out on the floor.

She looked around frantically. The roar of the Whizbees was getting close. Where would she get--- aha, a giant gumball machine...!

After pilfering an abandoned prench horn, she'd slid under a nearby band stand and gone to work. She'd never worked so frantically in her life; at the same time it didn't seem to matter-- she could see every part in her head, feel how every connection should be made.

When she reemerged into the light, it was a whole new ballgame. The over-sized globe from the
gumball machine served as a holding jar. The vacuum motor was stripped out of its case; the hose duct taped into place for security. The bell of the prench horn had met its fate and become the barrel of the gun. And everything was held together with stripped screws, dabs of superglue and layers of duct tape. But the Whizbee Collector Gun mark I was go.

She strapped the contraption she'd made to her back-- she'd had to scavenge her panniers for the belt to go around her middle-- and looked around. Whizbees were everywhere. But she needed one last thing....

Whizbees were swarming over an abandoned cart of perfume bottles. They were clustered most thickly around the large sample bottle of Eu de Spring number 5.

*Perfect. Bait.*

Ignoring the zaps from angry Whizbees, she waded in and took the bottle, and quickly duct taped it to the bell. A quick squeeze shot a spray of floral perfume twenty feet out. The Whizbees began swarming.

Applebloom pulled out her potato, wished briefly that it was a zap apple, and jammed it down on the tines of the power plug. The vacuum motor whined to life. She lifted the barrel, aimed it at the oncoming swarm, and pulled the trigger. With a whoosh, the fizzing whizbees were sucked out of the air and into the gumball globe.

Then she did something she wouldn't have thought of, back in that dream. She turned around, pulled out the earthing wire coiled under the motor, and jabbed the screwdriver taped at the end into the floor. With a crack, the charge the Whizbees had been accumulating grounded out. The Whizbees inside the jar immediately went docile.

*Well, horseapples,* Applebloom thought. *I guess I ended up being a pest control pony after all.* She decided she'd have time enough to mourn that later. There were Whizbees to stop. She galloped to the next swarm and started vacuuming again.

The next moment Grunt and Babs came running up beside her. Babs had a bag slung over one shoulder, and an enormous pair of scissors strapped across her back. She was sweaty and covered with hair clippings and her mane looked strangely wet, but she was grinning from ear to ear. "You wouldn't believe it, Applebloom," she said. "I cut everypony loose... it was nuttin' but hair. hair an' a giant pair of sneakers--- one good dose o' hair oil and it fell apart--"

"Get me another gumball machine!" Applebloom yelled. She grounded out the bees again, twisted the globe off, and duct taped a toy balloon over the mouth. *Rubber doesn't conduct electricity.*

"What--"

"We gotta round up these Whizbees before they cause any more damage, or they make Malfunzio any more powerful!" She said. she set the sealed globe on the ground. "This'll do the trick," she said, hefting the gun. "But the Gumball things fill up fast. Get me more!" Babs and Grunt realized what she was doing and hustled to obey.

---

Applejack raged silently-- and not so silently-- in the center of the Glass Palace. Despite the precautions she had ordered, chaos had erupted all over the pavilion around her. And she hadn't done a thing.
She'd had no choice.

She wasn't slow; it was fairly obvious by the time that flying machine full of screaming batponies had flown overhead the first time that things had gone up pig puckey creek and got stuck. But just as she was about to stop recharging the sealing on the Palace--- surely it would hold on its own for a few--- and join the efforts to bring back control, old Malfunzio had made a showing. He'd appeared in front of her, his broken-back snake form nearly as large as his statue now, and waved a disjointed finger at her.

"Ah ah ah ah, mia bella principessa," he'd said, amused. "You don't want to be abandoning your little spell, right now. In fact... you might want to switch to something a little bit more... supportive." He unfolded his hands and emptied them. Dozens of gleaming metal bolts fell on the ground.

Applejack had shot a look down at the bolts, looked up at the dome, thousands of tons of glass laced together with steel rods and rivets--- "You son of a--" "Such language! Hai baciato tua madre con quella bocca?" He'd tsked at her. "Ah well, point made, Mia Bella Mela. You will not be interfering with my fun.... unless you want your faithful little ponies to be crushed. ciao." Then he'd vanished again.

Sweating in earnest, Applejack switched from a sealing spell, to a binding one. The strain on her magic redoubled, as she now was carrying the lives of hundreds on her shoulders...

Applebloom worked her way up and down the Glass Palace... Maker, was she ever going to stop running up and down again?... Spraying perfume, luring the Whizbees in, sealing them in globe after globe. She was exhausted. She was bruised, sweaty, and her electric burns stung like the dickens, especially the ones on her rump. She probably looked like she'd sat in a bucket of coals, she thought to herself. Whatever.

She cornered the last swarm at the central rotunda, vacuumed it up, and sank to the ground with a groan. She'd ground it out in a minute... she was just too pooped. The rotunda was full of noise, enough to make her ears hurt.

It took her a minute to realize that the sound all around her was... applause.

"She did it!" somepony said. She looked up to see battered ponies scattered all around, stamping and cheering, Red Fort and Kilo Wattz leading the applause. She blinked in shock, then blushed as red as a pink lady as a warm glow spread inside her chest. Darn it, even if she did end up a bug pony, this wasn't too bad.

A moment later Omari and his group came trotting in double time. Lockheed was with him, his head wrapped in gauze. They were dinged up, scratched, bitten, and their armor had some stains on it that didn't bear close attention. Two red-headed ponies were behind them, grinning ear to ear at everyone. "The Southeast dome is secure," Omari shouted, snapping a salute at noone in particular.

Before anyone could respond, the runaway biplane made another pass, barely twenty feet off the floor.[1] it just passed the great dome when the engine, finally out of fuel, sputtered to a halt. They began to lose their last few feet of altitude.

"Oh crap, this is it--!" Moonpenny said.

"Hang tight guys, we gotta guide her in--"
"Goodbye you two, I love you guys--"

"Shut up and keep her steady!"

"aaaaAAAAAAAAA---" with a splash the landing gear skipped and hit the surface of the long, narrow reflecting pool. By the divine grace of an all-knowing and all-foreseeing God, the plane, being an experimental prototype, did not have wheels, but rather ski-like runners so that it could be launched from a track. Thus it did not noseplow like it should have, but instead skimmed down the surface of the pool. It lost speed smoothly and gradually, slowing to a halt at the very end of the pool so that its stalled propeller touched the nose of the seapony fountain statue with a faint metallic "ding."

The batpony triplets sagged in relief. Moonpenny slumped in the pilot's seat and grinned. "I kinda think I want one of these..."

Before anypony could exult in the miraculous landing, Applejack set up a shout. "Somepony get up here and help me!" she cried. Every roughneck in earshot rushed up onto the grandstand to where she stood, her horn and eyes locked on the sky.

"What is it, Highness?"

"It ain't over yet," she said, sweat trickling down her brow. "That broke-back son of a slug took the bolts out of the skylight. I don't know how long I can hold the dome up!" Immediately the unicorns present threw their own magic up to the dome. "No, don't fuss with me, get everypony out of here! The doors are open, I unsealed 'em, just evacuate, I kin throw up a shield..."

Low, cackling laughter filled the dome, along with the sound of slow applause. with a whoosh of smoke and chaos, the three Malfunzios appeared. With a 'vwoop' they melded back together in a singular form. Ponies quailed and moaned in fear. He was barely the size of his statue now, maybe twenty feet long at best, if one were able to straighten him out. Even so, in the mind's eye he towered. "Bravissimi, bravissimi," he chortled. "You modern ponies are much more, how you say, resourceful than I ever imagined. You actually overcame all my little challenges I threw your way." He looked around at the damage. "Well, for a given value of overcome, I suppose..."

"And so brave and noble! Yout Principessa, willing to let all her little ponies flee to safety while she faces the peril alone. Of course, it is no peril for someone who can shield herself from a mere falling roof, no?

"But it will be not so easy, I think. Oh, the doors, they are open-- but I do not think you little ponies can gallop far enough away..."

"What do you mean, Malfunzionza?" Applejack gritted.

"I mean--" he pointed one of his broken-looking paws at the Thunderhead, still chugging serenely away, and snapped his fingers. The puffs of steam that had been chuffing out of the pistons suddenly stopped. Alarm whistles began blowing. The engine let out a faint groan. "I don't think you know just how bad it can get when this pretty new choo-choo engine goes wrong."

Red Fort jumped up in alarm. "Holy Maker he's jammed the governor!"

"Removed it actually," Malfunzionza said. "And plugged the steam lines, and the emergency safety valve..." his chuckle grew to a booming laugh. "You see, mia Bella," he said to Applejack, "There's a certain drawback to using a sun stone to heat a boiler: you can't turn it off."

"This engine, she's-a sturdy built... but she won't hold forever. Soon, the pressure inside those
ENORMOUS boilers will be too much and..." he made an exploding noise and flung his hands out. "As big as she is, the blast will take out this whole... glass... THING..." he looked around at the Glass Palace in loathing. "And everything in it. And everything for at least a mile around." He paused dramatically. "I wonder if an alicorn principessa can survive such a thing?

"Oh, I guess we will all find out soon enough." He cackled.

"Like heck!" Red Fort was already on the move. He galloped up to the Thunderhead and began climbing the flank of the massive engine, a sledgehammer clenched in his jaw.

"Cosa sta facendo?---AGH!" Roaring in anger, the Roughnecks charged the draconequus. The cowardly draconequus was not yet used to being bigger than everyone else, and reacted accordingly, cringing and shrieking. Covered by their distraction, Red Fort reached the top of the engine unmolested.

"Sorry for the rough treatment ol' gal," he said under his breath. "Hang on, your Highness-- things are about to get a mite STUFFY in here!" With that he began whaling away at the broken safety valve atop the boiler. It took barely three blows; the fireplug-sized valve snapped off like it was made of celery. There was a scream of pain and Red Fort disappeared as a geyser of steam shot skyward.

Applejack felt the blast of steam hit the dome, cracking the glass with the heat. It was now or never. Desperately, with one almighty push, she put all her power behind it and blew the dome outward. It peeled open like an orange rind, tons of glass and steel falling out and away, to land harmlessly in the empty grounds outside. Overcome by the strain, she passed out.

The roar of steam dwindled to a moan, then to a hiss as the Thunderhead bled out. Applebloom sat up and looked around, dazed. The dome overhead was gone. Rolling clouds of steam obscured everything. Here and there something burned or threw off sparks. She could see ponies running, heard someone calling for a medic from where Red Fort fell. Cries of panic and pain came from every direction. She could see Applejack laying unconscious up on what was left of the grandstand while Roughnecks stood around her, some guarding her, some trying desperately to rouse her...

Malfunziona's booming laughter filled the air, and his mocking clapping. Applebloom looked up. Apparently the destruction had done him favors; he was bigger than ever, twice as tall as before. "BRAVISSIMI!" he said. "And to think this is but one building in this glorious new age. Already I can hear all of your Baltimare city. Cogs, gears, pistons, pulleys, wires and valves, tubes and pipes, millions of your wretched little toys to send spiraling out of control. I will FEAST on power as you plunge into a Dark Age!"

Applebloom didn't think she'd ever been so mad. There wasn't a word for this kind of mad. Mad was hot and full of tears; this rage, this fury had pushed her all the way through and out the other side into something cold. She got to her hooves. "Like Tartarus you will," she said.

The applause stopped. Malfunziona gaped at her. Then he burst into cackles. "WHAT? Tu piccola peste, who do you think you are?"

"Ah'm Applebloom!" She tightened her belt and settled her cumbersome backpack into place on her shoulders. Her ears hurt, her head throbbed, and the burns on her sides and flanks burned like the dickens, but she didn't care. "I'm an INVENTOR. I fix practical problems. And that's all you are... just a problem to be fixed.

"And there ain't nothin' wrong with you that I can't fix with my HOOVES!" she galloped straight at him, head down, hooves pounding.
Malfunziona roared with laughter. The moment she was within arm's reach, he snatched her up in one enormous, knobble-jointed fist. He held her up to his face and sprayed her with spittle as he laughed. "You little apple bug," he chortled, giving her a quick squeeze that made her eyes bug out. "You are completely PAZZO. You're not anything. A pegasus could have called down lightning on me. A unicorn could have blasted me with magic. a FULL GROWN earth pony might have tried his strength on me. Not that it would have mattered," he shrugged theatrically, "but hey, they could."

"You? You are a FOAL. A helpless, useless, powerless little blank-flanked FOAL!"

"Then it's a good thing this little blank-flank FOAL," said Applebloom, "Is holding a GUN," with that, she stuffed the barrel of her bug gun up his nostril, flipped the vacuum to reverse, and hit the trigger.

Malfunziona's eyes bulged in horror as an entire swarm of extremely cheesed off Fizzing Whizbees at full charge roared up into his sinus cavities. He dropped Applebloom with a howl, clutching at his face. Applebloom tumbled to the ground, managing somehow to land without breaking anything. She looked back up at the thrashing draconequus. He was clutching at his head, sparks of lightning shooting out his nose.

"Non le api! Non le api! Oh Dio, stanno ronzando nel mio cervello!!" He tried to punch his own skull to get them out. This was a mistake. The whizbees promptly discharged everything they had. The draconequus lit up from within, his skeleton blazing neon white, and lightning crackling down his skin. After he jittered in place for several seconds, the light went out and he slumped into a boneless pile, eyes crossed and smoke leaking from his nose and ears. Like a deflating balloon he dwindled in size to little more than a typical pony.

Ponies began creeping up on the tableau, gaping in awe. Applebloom struggled to her hooves one more time. "It's not over yet!" she said. Good gracious almighty did she hurt all over, but her mind was racing a mile a minute. "He'll recover and it'll start all over again!" She shrugged out of the battered remains of her Whizbee gun and let it clatter to the floor. "Quick, somepony... get me some tools! And, and, and--- okay I got it, that big moving sculpture, with all the gears--- bring me all the cogs and stuff from it! And some good solid pipe an' fittin's!" Everyone gaped at her. "NOW!" she yelled. "Hurry!" Ponies ran.

You did NOT argue with somepony who'd just TKO'd a draconequus.

Moments later, ponies were rolling the wagon-wheel sized gears to where Applebloom stood. Following her instructions, they laid the gear flat on the floor, picked the draconequus up and piled him in the middle of it in a loose coil. Applebloom was already whacking together the beginnings of some sort of framework out of metal pipe and rebar. Sweat was running in her eyes and she hurt all over in ways she didn't know was possible... lordy did those burns on her flank sting... but she couldn't stop. Not till it was done.

Thank goodness there were so many ponies ready to follow her instructions. Hooves came from nowhere to help hold the frame, to tighten bolts; one pair helped hold her up when she started to topple. Her vision blurred; she kept right on working and shouted for another length of pipe, another joint, another fitting.

It took forever before it was finished. She was nearly blind with exhaustion when she twisted the last bolt in place and staggered back to admire her work. "Eyup," she said, smiling in satisfaction. "That oughta hold him."
Then she slumped to the floor. Sakes, her flanks stung. And her back and head felt funny too. And everything seemed to be disappearing into sparkly...light....

"YAGH!" Applebloom snapped awake so suddenly that all four hooves went into the air. She lay there panting for a second, trying to get a grip on herself. After her heart slowed a bit she sank back into her pillow. Sakes alive, what a wakeup.

"Bad dream?" Applejack said, smiling at her over the rail of the hospital bed.

Applebloom yawned and rubbed her eyes. "No, actually I--" wait a minute. Hospital bed? She sat up. Yes, it was a hospital bed. There was a doctor standing there. Applejack was sitting by her side. "What the hay?" she croaked.

"Here, have some water," Applejack said, pressing a cup into her hooves. "Drink it slow now."

Applebloom obeyed, sipping carefully, letting the coolth slide down her throat and cut through the dry raspies.

"Sakes you gave us a start," Applejack pulled her into a hug. "Thank heavens you're all right..." She sat back and looked Applebloom over, beaming and a little teary-eyed. "Don't do that to me ever again, y'hear?"

"Okay..." Applebloom said, confused. The doctor stepped in.

"If I may..." he quickly listened to Applebloom's heart, checked her temperature on her forehead, checked her reflexes with a hammer, looked into her ears and eyes with a little light. "Why'd you jump up like that, if I may ask?" he said.

"I... did you ever doze off in the middle of doin' something important?" Applebloom said. "An' then you wake up and go 'omigosh, I---' Omigosh, Malfunziona!" She almost jumped out of the bed.

Applejack chuckled and pushed her back down. "Now easy does it, there," she said. "That crooked rascal's taken care of. Though there's some ponies who want to ask you questions about what you did..." there was a commotion out in the hallway. "But that can wait for a minute. You got a few visitors first." The door opened, and in poured a half dozen folks, all shouting out in relief when they saw her sitting up awake. Babs was first through the door, hopping with excitement; she was wearing an enormous pair of scissors strapped across her back for some reason. Then came Lockheed; the gryphon was sporting a bandage around his head and a big smile. Growf and Grunt came in. Next, to her surprise, was Kilo Wattz. He'd actually slicked his hair down and was looking rather scholastic and respectable. Then, in a wheelchair, was--

"Red Fort!" Applebloom squealed with glee. "You're alive!!"

"By the grace of the Maker, yeah," the engineer said with a half grin. It had to be half; most of his left side was covered in bandages. "Shoulda been parboiled, but pure luck-- the safety valve broke off crooked. It hit me in the chest and knocked me outta the way a split second before the steam could cook me." He winced a little. "It don't feel too fun, but I'm alive. I like to think the old Thunderhead reached out and love-tapped me to save my hide. Glad to see you're feeling better."

"What happened?" Applebloom asked, rubbing her eyes. "why am I here?"

"Well you've been asleep for almost two days," Applejack said. "Ever since--"

"Two days? Hokey smokes..." Applebloom suddenly turned red. "Oh wow," she said, squirming suddenly. "That explains a few things..."
A hasty run to the little fillies room, and a quick return, set everyone chuckling. Mortified, Applebloom got a boost and climbed back into bed. "whuf, I still feel so tired..." she said.

"Not surprising, all considered." The doctor said.

"Well?" Babs said, hopping up and down on her hooftips and grinning eagerly. "Do ya feel any different?"

"Different? Why would I--" She stopped, her breath catching. She remembered that crazy tingling on her flank--- She started to pull up her hospital gown to look, then stopped and clapped her hooves to her eyes. "I can't look," she whimpered. "It... it isn't a bug-catching cutie mark, is it?"

There was a long, strange pause. "Uh... no... but I think she was talking about--"

"Ah can't stand it!" Applebloom pulled her hospital gown around to look at her bare flank.

No, not bare. A cutie marked flank. An apple, overlaid by a shiny metal gear and an Erlenmeyer flask, surrounded by a golden laurel wreath.

*I'm an INVENTOR. I solve practical problems...*

"OMIGOSH OMIGOSH OMIGOSH YES YES YES!" Applebloom bounced up and down in the bed, her wings buzzing with excitement.

Wait. What? What? WHAT?

She flapped them again. Once. Twice. Hesitantly, she reached up with a hoof and brushed her forehead--- and tapped the tip of a horn. Flabbergasted. Gobsmacked. Boggled. Croggled. She found herself wishing Sweetiebelle was there because she couldn't think of a word sufficient to describe how knocked for a loop she was. She looked up at the others, her eyes round and her jaw slack.

And they were staring back at her, just as flummoxed. Babs was the first to crack. The Manehattan filly started cackling. Then HOWLING. "She-- she noticed the Cutie Mark FIRST??" She rocked back and forth in her seat, laughing so hard she could barely breathe and clutching her sides.

Applejack joined in, laughing till tears rolled down her face. "Horn? Nah. Wings? Nah. But my oh my, she gets her cutie mark and she.... oh hoo hahahahahahah!!" She leaned helplessly against the rail of the hospital bed and laughed her lungs out. Pretty soon the rest of the ponies and others there were chuckling too, if not laughing out loud. Applebloom just sat there with her lower lip pooched out and glared at them all. That only made them laugh harder.

Eventually the laughter faded back to good-natured chuckling. Applejack reached over and tousled Applebloom's mane. "Oh don't be like that, Sugarcube," she said. "We're all just happy for you, is all. Besides--" she gave her baby sister a nose boop. "It is kinda funny."

Applebloom tried to keep sulking, but finally gave in and gave her a grin. "Sorry, Babs," she said. "Guess I sorta stepped all over your cuteceneara, huh?"

Babs pretended to huff. "Oh, well I NEVER!" She said in her snottiest imitation of an upper crust Manehattan accent. "Going and ASCENDING on MY cuteceneara day?" she gave a haughty sniff. "SOME ponies simply have NO class a-TALL..." She tossed her mane, then grinned when Applebloom giggle-snorted. "Ahh, c'mon, geddoudahea. It's great! Now it's a double-cuteceneara! And an--- Ascendencineara? Is that a thing?"

"Guess it's gonna be," Applebloom said. "But... why me? Why'd I ascend?"
"I think that would be obvious," a familiar voice said. Applebloom turned and found herself face to face with Celestia's smiling image.

"Oh, Princess Celestia, you're here!" Then she sat back and realized the image was framed by a mirror. They had apparently wheeled Applejack's magic mirror-wardrobe into the hospital room. "Oh... um... I guess you're not here. But... why would it be obvious?"

Celestia smiled warmly. "Honestly, are all Apples so self-effacing?"

"Not me, I'm fulla beans," Babs said, smirking.

Celestia cocked an eyebrow. "True enough," she teased. "But Applebloom, think about what you did the other day. You pushed yourself further than ponies twice your age, with ten times your power and training would manage. You not only earned your Cutie Mark with your talent, you used it to defeat and imprison a Draconequus--- something even Luna and I only managed with the Elements of Harmony."

Discord's face appeared briefly in the mirror behind her. "In other words, she cheated. Nyehh." He stuck his tongue out at Celestia while Applebloom stifled her giggles.

"Discord--!" Celestia said, annoyed. Discord gave everyone a "who me?" look and vanished. "As I was saying," Celestia continued with a roll of her eyes, "You ascended, because you transcended. Those who witnessed it are already calling you 'the Alicorn of Invention.' " She dimpled, her eyes twinkling in amusement. "Already you've demonstrated a knack for inspiring others. Ponies are already halfway to making you and your friends into folk heroes. Stories of the Brave little Barber--"


"The Thunderhead Engineer, who risked death to save a Princess...."

At this, Red Fort coughed into his hoof and looked off at nothing in particular. While Applejack... dimpled at him?? "Okay, that's another I gotta hear..." Applebloom giggled, giving her sister a look that promised all SORTS of embarrassing questions later.

"And... well suffice it to say that a surprising number of legends were born just the other day," Celestia concluded.

"Forgive me for interrupting, your Highness," Kilo Wattz said. "But there is one mystery that I would like to clarify-- to satisfy my curiosity as a scientist.... that... cage that Princess Applebloom built..."

"I have to concur," Red Fort said. "I must confess that my own engineering inclined bump of curiosity was aroused. If the young filly wouldn't mind explaining?"

"Oh indeed, I did want to ask about that myself," Celestia said. "Babs, dear, would you open another leaf of the mirror so I-- oh good. Thank you." The portion of the mirror Babs unfolded clouded, then cleared to show the interior of the rather badly damaged Glass Palace. Standing in the middle of the floor was a giant construction of metal. It was a bare tubular framework of an isocahedron, inside of which was a dodecahedron made of interlocking gears. Every now and then the object shook slightly, as if something inside was struggling mightily. Sulfurous swearing in Neightalian emanated from within.

"I'll keep the question simple," Celestia said. "How is this cage of gears possibly holding him?"

"Oh, it's simple," Applebloom said. "It's holding him because it's built right-- but still doesn't work
Celestia paused, her brow furrowed. "Pardon?"

"See, I kinda wondered how Proud Lion managed to hold him in a bronze tube. Till Malfunziona told me the secret himself.

"He's a chaos critter, a Draconequis--"

"Lesser," came the echo of Discord's voice from the mirror.

"--And, like he told me: he can't use mechanical stuff. And he really can't repair anything. It's totally backward to what he is. All he can do is break stuff. Can you show a picture of the canister, Princess Celestia?" Celestia nodded and the image changed to that of the canister sitting on a workman's table. "Now I didn't get a long look at the canister Malfunziona broke out of, but I did notice one thing: It's got a trick lid. If you try and unscrew the lid, it tightens in the other direction. Sorta like a Chinese hoof puzzle. No matter which way you turned it, you were still tightening it. So, like, breaking the seal made it seal more. And the rules of his own power wouldn't let him open it."

"So how'd he escape?" Applejack asked.

Applebloom shrugged. "The canister musta got damaged from the outside," she said. "See that dent on that side? That there must've done it. bend the seal so that turning it one way stripped it."

Applebloom shrugged again. "I decided to make something a li'l sturdier." she sketched out three gears in the air with her hoof--- and yeeped in surprise when pale yellow lines of magic formed the actual image in the air. Crossing her eyes she saw that her horn was lit. "Whups." She decided to roll with it. "see these three gears? What's wrong with 'em?"

Red Fort chuckled. "you put three gears like that, they won't turn," he said. "They're locked together- oh, I see." He glanced at the mirror, which had returned to an image of the cog-wheel prison. "Slick trick there, pint-size."

"Yup. The big ball o' gears is the same way, all around. The whole thing is a machine that can't work." Applebloom nodded. "I spaced 'em a li'l off, so if you break any one gear, all the gears will turn free. But Malfunziona can't break any of them, because his power won't let him."

"AhahaHAAAA!" Kilo Wattz. "Because the whole thing is a machine that, if he breaks it, he fixes it." He clapped his hooves. "Brilliant!"

"I wonder what happens to him if he does," Babs wondered.

Discord reappeared in the mirror behind Celestia, sticking his head around a corner in the background. "Something unpleasant, I assure you," he called out. "Using your magic against its nature is really, REALLY bad for us D-qs..."

"Discord..." Celestia said, annoyed. He popped in closer. In FRONT of Celestia this time.

"I'm more of a big shot than him so I have less restraints," he went on, "Mine is that my magic has to have... something random in it. But even I don't try to run contrary to my nature." He shuddered. "I did it once. Distinctly unpleasant."

"Ack! Discord, get out of my--" Celestia said. He disappeared, then reappeared back out in the hallway behind her.

"Had cramps for three weeks after!"
"DISCORD! OUT!"

"Couldn't he just... use his muscles and whack it, 'r somethin'?" Applejack pointed out.

Applebloom shook her head. "Remember how puny he was? I think all his muscle is magic." She thought about it. "You prob'ly better tell them mages to seal all that in somethin' more airtight, in case he gets clever, lets all his power fizzle out, and slips out through the cracks."

"I will," Celestia said. "They'll be able to incorporate your trap into his final prison, now that we understand the logic behind it."

"Logic? Bleeaaaahh..."

"Discord, so help me---!"

Applebloom giggled fit to bust. "Well, gosh, now what?"

"Now..." Applejack said. "You rest up a bit...."

"Awww..."

"And we plan you and Bab's Cuteceneara," Applejack said. Applebloom and Babs cheered. "--er, Ascensioneara. Coronation. Thing."

"Big party," Red Fort proffered.

"That'll do."

"This is so... crazy," Applebloom yawned and grinned. A faint worried expression crossed her face. "But, I don't wanna sound whiny or nuthin' but... why didn't Sweetiebelle or Scootaloo call?"

Celestia chuckled. "As it turns out..."
Chapter 40

The *Fabulosity*, as a ship true to her mistress' nature, was opulently appointed. She had quite a number of luxury appointments and rooms, filled with sumptuous features arguably more fit for a millionaire's luxury yacht rather than a diplomatic passenger zeppelin. A full gymnasium with tennis courts and jazzercise ("one must sweat to keep what they get, darling."), extra large quarters with all the plush accoutrements ("And the staff stay in these tiny things? How horrid, I won't hear of it--- fetch me a unicorn who knows an interior enlargement spell"), fine dining for everyone down to the bellhops ("Mister Wolfgang Buck, I presume? Do you have enough staff to handle the workload? How are the facilities, is there any--- oh never mind, just write down a wish list, there's a dear, we'll order it up") and a fully equipped salon ("Do you think I wake up looking like this, darling?") were just the start of it. Most of the crew and staff had spent the first two or three nights lying stiffly atop fine linen sheets, terrified to move lest they scuff something.

None of this, from the decadent dining down to the plush carpeting, had come cheap. The Mane Six's royally assigned financier, Bean Counter, had nearly had a chain of heart attacks when he saw the bills. Then he had seen how the Alicorn of Generosity had defrayed most of the expense and had barely been able to restrain himself from begging for her hoof in marriage.

Once their 'World Tour' had been announced, she had gone out and sold tickets. The wealthiest, most powerful and most influential beings in Equestria--- diplomats, celebrities, nobility, corporate tycoons--- had been offered passage. If you had to ask how much it cost, you couldn't afford it. The prestige of such a booking was too good to resist; ponies dripping with diamonds and bits eagerly paid for berthing aboard the luxurious royal ship for its projected round-the-world voyage. 75% of the gross had gone to miscellaneous charities; the remaining 25% had gone into expenses of the voyage such as crew salaries and ship supplies.

Rarity was also cunning enough to offer berthing to a small mob of reporters, gossip columnists, glam magazines-- she gave the writers and photographers free passage but secured deals with their publishers and editors for celebrity access, raking in fees for interviews and exclusives... not only with herself, but acting as middle-mare with her guests and passengers, many of whom it so happened she knew personally. Vetting such deals was lucrative; she halved the expense of the ship's refitting with the deal she brokered for an interview with Countess Coloratura alone.

Best of all, among her coterie was the newest fashion designer on the Canterlot scene, the mysterious and elusive Lady Midnight Mystique, whose designs were worn by all of the Princesses and whose work was more sought after and coveted than the crown jewels. She had sprung from nowhere onto the fashion scene with the coronation of the Mane Six, and was now an agent under Princess Rarity. She even had her own boutique on board the ship; Princess Rarity wore her gowns exclusively and gifted her highest ranking members of her staff with outfits from the mysterious mare's hoof ("it would do no good to have my entourage around me not looking their very best, after all."). With a captive audience of the wealthiest clothes horses in Equestria on board, Mystique's Boutique was doing a galloping business. No price could seem to be high enough, as enough money to float a small kingdom flowed into the flying palace's coffers. The paparazzi were going mad trying to catch a glimpse, much less a photo of the elusive fashionista, to no success. She was a ghost on board the ship, and the staff were fanatically protective of her privacy.

The fact that her "little boutique" was directly below Princess Rarity's own quarters, and directly accessible to them by a single spiral staircase, didn't even arouse any suspicion. Much to the amusement of Princess Rarity's Radiant Guard.
There were more unusual corners aboard the ship than a mere traveling boutique. Rarity, like the other newly made alicorn princesses, had a precocious gift for gathering those of unique and even exotic talents around her.... in a kingdom inhabited by a race of natural savants, that was saying something. But she was smart enough to know it behooved her to provide adequate facilities for those she employed to exercise whatever gifts they possessed. ("One does not hire a performing dolphin, put them in a fish bowl, and then complain when their performance becomes sub-par, my dear.") In addition to the boutique, tucked here and there about the ship were, among other things, a small metalworking toolshop, an apothecary, a costuming and makeup room, several walk-in closets that doubled as miniature armories with enough stabby, pointy, and shooty things to keep a dojo full of action-movie ninjas happy, a magic artifacts laboratory, a chamber with encryption and decryption tools, a complete supply of antitoxins and antivenoms (alongside bottled doses of very good reasons to have them) and a number of other odd little private workspaces along with secret entrances and passageways to access them.

There were more benign workrooms and such as well-- an apiary, an aquarium, a small glassworking studio--- but the majority of them typified the sort of guardponies assigned to the Radiant Guard. As Dapper Blue had told Sweetiebelle, the Guards of day and night battered their attackers into submission but The Radiant Guard were almost all Black Flag specialists. They took out their targets quickly, ruthlessly, and permanently, and their various 'hobbies' and skills reflected this.

Concerning Dapper Blue, among the more deceptively mundane of these siderooms was his own; a greenhouse. It was a fifty foot long glass and aluminum frame chamber on the top of the zeppelin's envelope where it could gain the best sunlight, that ran down the steel spine of the balloon. It was there that Dapper spent his idle hours on his hobby; growing exotic magical hybrids.

Ponies were often surprised to learn that Dapper Blue was actually a gifted gardener. He supposed there was a certain genetic predisposition for benign deception in his family; mares giving birth often experienced a burst of magical precognition, which influenced the name they chose for their foal. For whatever reason his own mother had chosen to give him a deliberately ambiguous name that at first blush had nothing whatsoever to do with his talent--- though as for that, he had recently come to reflect, his talent and cutie mark (a blue flower) certainly had never given a hint of his future working as a stylishly dressed undercover agent for the Crown. Before the Radiant Guard, he could have counted the number of times he'd worn a tuxedo in the line of duty on the fingers of one hoof. Perhaps dear Mother had peeked a bit further into the future than it seemed at first blush?

And the blue flower in his cutie mark looked rather innocuous itself, save to those who had run afoul of its magically induced sense of humor....

Mind, he hadn't been dishonest when he told Sweetiebelle that the Royal gardeners had produced the exploding chili pepper. He just hadn't disclosed that he was one of them. Or that it had been almost exclusively his own work and discovery. Not that it was a secret; he just didn't like to make a fuss about it. That was life in his line of work, he supposed; one little vague misdirection piled atop another. He wondered sometimes if that made him an enigma to other ponies, or just an annoyance.

He suspected he was an enigma to his current guests, at least. It had to be hard for the two fillies to reconcile their memory of a nattily dressed stallion who'd slogged through the bayou in a three piece suit with the figure before them now in dirt-stained coveralls and straw hat.

The fact that he was covered in rotten squash wasn't helping either. His own fault really. He'd been removing a rotted gourd from the planter box and had forgotten to disarm it before doing so. The moment he'd tried to heft it up with the shovel it had triggered, leaping into the air and flinging itself down upon his head with all due force. It was fortunate indeed that the thing had been rotted soft or he'd have been sporting a concussion or worse. As it was he was sporting a ruined hat and was
splattered with squash guts.

At least the foals got some amusement out of it; they were giggling fit to bust. Dapper kept a straight face. "And that, as I was saying, is why you shouldn't touch any of the plants in here without my supervision," he said calmly. He took off the straw hat and threw it in a waste bin, and began brushing pulp off the rest of himself. Magic stainproofing, worth every bit. "As useful as they can be, the plants I grow here can be temperamental, if not outright dangerous. I wouldn't want any of you to get hurt, now. So keep your hooves off everything, promise?"

"We promise," Sweetiebelle, Mud Puppy and Twig recited in harmony. The newt in Mudpuppy's mane made a squeaky-balloon noise of agreement.

Dapper Blue gave them a half smile. "All right then. I think we can go ahead with the little tour..." he looked at Mudpuppy. "Just so you know, I've set up your little friends' terrariums in a nice, warm shady spot at the end of the greenhouse, well away from anything harmful. So you can come up to visit them any time you want. I'll give you a key so you can get in..." She looked relieved at that. Princess Rarity had absolutely put her foot down about 'Princess Nectura' filling the royal quarters with her menagerie of reptiles, amphibians and other miscellaneous 'slimy swamp things.' To the point that the royal fashionista had nearly had a full-blown hissy-fit.

Everypony then learned that the little swamp princess could be as obstinate as a minotaur when the mood took her. She made it clear that if her pets were not welcome, then neither was she.

It was only the exile of Mudpuppy's swampy friends to the greenhouse, and promises that Mudpuppy and her pets would be given their own cabin once it was refitted and redecorated to be more environmentally appropriate for her muddy, slithery, somewhat squishy friends, that kept the peace.

They'd basically given up on getting her to quit carrying her pet newt in her mane. One front page photo of Princess Pinkamena at a party with Gummy in her bouffant...

"Very well then. Let's start that little tour... We'll start with the more, ah, benign plants here in the first quarter." The greenhouse was laid out by the square foot, with walkways between the carefully arrayed rectangles of tables, racks, floor pots and hanging baskets. The first such mini-plot was a square of about a dozen clay pots with large, cheerful looking orange and yellow flowers. It was hard to tell what was odder about them; the fact that they had broad smiling faces, or that they were all humming a cheerful, wordless tune to which they all silently swayed.

"They look like Miss Cheerilee's cutie mark," Sweetiebelle said, blinking in surprise.

"They do? Hm. Well, these are Sunflowers," Dapper Blue said.

"I woulda called them 'Songflowers," Sweetiebelle said, bobbing her head along with the humming. "La la laaa..." she sang.

The flowers all turned their attention to her. "La la laaa..." they sang back.

Sweetiebelle squeaked in delight and clapped her hooves. "Doe, a deer, a fe-male deer..."

"Doe, a deer, a fe-male deer..." the flowers replied. The others laughed and applauded.

"I wonder if I could teach them to harmonize," Sweetiebelle mused.

As she spoke, one of the flowers in the front row puffed up its cheeks and spat something at the ceiling. A glowing ball of light slowly floated down. The foals "oohed" and "aahed." Dapper Blue
deftly caught it in his hoof and held it out for them to see; it was a tiny seed. "The light only lasts about an hour or so," he said. "Nifty though. I'm hoping to breed them so the light lasts longer."

He stepped to the side. "And over here we have some trollmatoes," he said. "Terrible name, I know, but I had to call them something." There were dozens of wire racks covered in tomato vines and ripe red fruit. The tomatoes looked perfectly normal, except for the wrinkles that made them look like they had sour, scrunched-up faces. He looked at the foals. "Know any good jokes?" he said suddenly.

Sweetiebelle suddenly got suspicious. That was out of the blue. And Dapper was keeping his face straight; too straight. "Uh, not off hand," she said carefully. She gave Mudpuppy a nudge; the other filly caught on, and quickly shook her head. Twig, being a boy, wasn't so quick.

"Sure." he said. "I knowed a pony who was so poor..." he paused.

Dapper Blue started to grin. "How poor was he?" he said.

"He was so poor, the poor *dépouille* couldn' even pay attention!" the batpony colt cackled at his own joke--- just as he caught a tomato in the teeth. Mudpuppy and Sweetiebelle squealed with laughter as he spluttered and tried to wipe the mushy red gunk off his face. Dapper Blue chuckled and gave him a kerchief to wipe his face.

"Sorry," he apologized, though he didn't quite sound it. "In case you didn't guess they don't like jokes. The worse the joke is, the more tomatoes they fling. And they're pretty harsh critics; had a shiphand who used to come up here and crack puns for hours on end. Then the tomatoes ripened and let's just say he's probably still picking salsa out of his ears."

There was a hydroponic section with a few water plants such as surprisingly large lily pads and tangled wads of kelp that wriggled their tendrils and glared ominously at everything with deep-set, glowing red eyes.... and cattails that actually looked like cats. "Disturbing," was Sweetiebelle's verdict on those.

They peeked into the darkened quarter of the greenhouse to take a quick glimpse of the night plants. "they're usually asleep at this hour," Dapper said. "So don't expect much..." Oh how wrong he was. The planterns and sun-shrooms were apparently restless, and four ponies clip-clopping into their darkened hothouse was enough to wake them. The planterns lit aglow and the sun shrooms began spitting their glowing spores everywhere, which was enough to wake the others. Mushrooms began spitting clouds of noxious dust and pebble-hard spores in every direction in irritation at being awoken. "Awgh! Cain't ye do owt, Mudpuppy?" Twig said, coughing and dodging spitting plants. "Yew be the one w' plant magic!"

"I grows 'em, I cain't tell 'em what to do!"

"Why din't y' learn that first??"

"Well dog-gone," Mudpuppy snapped back in anger, "Mebbe it escaped your know-all, but *most plants don't have ears*!"

Sweetiebelle suddenly remembered how the sunflowers had responded to her voice. Some time ago she'd learned a "microphone" spell that amplified the voice and gave it the resonance one would hear in a amphitheatre or stadium. Personally she thought it made her sound like she was singing in the shower. *Anyway, I'm gonna need it if they're gonna hear me over all the noise,* she thought as the pearl-sized globe of light left the tip of her horn and settled on her throat.
"Sleep, darling sleep,

Thy father tends the sheep,

Thy mother shakes the dreamland tree

To bring down sweet dreams just for thee

Sleep, darling sleep...."

Lo and behold, it worked. The toadstools and sprouts stopped spitting and puffing at one another and listened to her, rapt. They began to yawn and droop and, one by one, they drifted back off to sleep.

"Ga lee, ain't dad sumfin!" Twig exclaimed-- and got a frantic round of "shush!" from the others. They hastily tip- hoofed out and closed the door behind them. "I heard of plants likin' music, but ah sho nuf never heard DAT," Twig chortled.

"Fascinating," Dapper said. "I've never seen them react like that before. Not even when I play music in the greenhouse. They must like your voice, Duchess." Sweetiebelle scrunched up her nose and flushed with pleasure at the compliment.

"That song always works on the Cake twins," she said, trying to sound dismissive. "They love the way that spell makes my voice sound."

"I tink mebbe it a wee bit more den dat spell," Mudpuppy said, giving her a hip-bump. "You a right pretty warbler when you get the urge." Sweetiebelle blushed redder and ducked her head.

They went by one section of plants that was cordoned off by the rest by a wall of sandbags, and had an extra-wide aisle around them. "This is where I keep the fire-based hybrids and similar," Dapper said. Sweetiebelle immediately recognized the pepper plant; it was a low green bush covered with angry-looking chiles. There was also a pair of dwarf cherry trees, several potato mounds, a star-shaped fruit that crackled with electric sparks... he showed them a neat trick with the peppers; he picked one, stomped on it so the juice squirted out in a stream, then hastily stepped back. A line of flame shot up the trail of pepper juice and the whole thing went up with a bang. "And don't step too near the potato mounds," he said, tossing a loose pebble. It landed, and the ground underneath fountained upward in a roar.

"I wondered why the floor were steel plate," Twig said in alarm, shaking his head to stop the ringing in his ears.

The next point of the tour was a patch of pea plants, or at least Dapper Blue said so. The plants in question had plenty of pods, but also sported strange green heads with mouths shaped like cannon barrels. They whipped their heads in every direction, glaring angrily.... whether at the other plants or at the magic shield blocking them off, Sweetiebelle wasn't sure. "The shield is kind of a necessity," Dapper said before anypony could ask. "All the pea plant varieties tend to have a bit of a hair-trigger. That and they seem to have a grudge against the gator plums." He pointed to the next planter over, which was full of enormous purple pods.

A buzzing insect flew in low over the pods. There was a snap, and the bug was gone. one of the pods had split open into an enormous toothy maw that had lunged up on its thick stem, snapped the insect out of the air, and now squatted in its pot, chewing its meal with obvious savor. All three foals skittered several steps back and stood well behind the resident gardener.
In response to this sudden movement there was a volley of pops from the pea plants. They spat peas at the ruminating gator plum, only to have their fire rattle off the shield between them. It pointedly ignored them as they reloaded, shucking pods off their own vines, filling their mouths and spitting them out with enough force to surely cause serious injury. The gator plums responded by blowing raspberries and making several rude gestures with their fronds.

"And there's the problem," Dapper Blue sighed. "These plants would be so useful for things like security and home defense... But for a few rare exceptions like the pepper plants, it's deuced difficult to get any use out of them. They're not inclined to be very obedient anyway, and they're too busy quibbling with one another! The gator plums agitate the pea plants, the pea plants are so hair-trigger they shoot at anything that moves, even the other plants... the sunflowers and sun-shrooms throw a fit because the other plants eat their sun-seeds... the cold-natured varieties--" he pointed to a row of 'hot'boxes with a miscellany of pale blue, ice crystal covered plants-- "get cantankerous and sulky around the fire plants and vice versa... the melons are fairly mellow, but when THEY get in on the ruckus, ugh---"

"It took me months to figure out a layout for the greenhouse that didn't have mortal enemies bordering each other. You should have seen my first garden; half the time it looked like a food fight in the middle of a firework factory explosion." The foals giggled. He looked at Mudpuppy. "I'm sorry, Princess Necturus," he said. "I must confess I was a little surprised that your talent for communing with with swamp animals and making plants grow... didn't extend to controlling plants as well."

Mudpuppy shrugged. She was obviously a little put out but was trying not to show. "Tain't like I had a chance t' learn such like, yet," she said. "Like I say, not many plants got ears..."

"Umm, that's another reason we came up here," Sweetiebelle said. "Our tutor says that 'Princess Nectura' needs more practice with her plant magic." She flushed. "And so do I. With everything else, too, apparently," she muttered in an aside. "We were hoping you had some seeds we could practice on...?"

"M'ole the non es'plodey kind, silvous plait," Mudpuppy added quickly.

"I think I can manage that," Dapper Blue said, amused.

He led them past another sealed hothouse filled with all-too-familiar pale blue flowers that glowed under their moonlamps, and through a plastic curtain into the final quarter of the greenhouse. This last portion of the greenhouse was filled with racks of refreshingly mundane and ordinary flowers, fruits and vegetables; plants busy doing nothing more exciting than absorbing water and sunlight. Dapper Blue dug around under one of the tables of seedlings for a moment, then came out with a tray of paper bags. "Here you go," he said as Mudpuppy and Sweetiebelle took the bags. "A few odds and ends from the seed bags. This should suit you."

"That was quick," Sweetiebelle said doubtfully.

"I have a lot of ponies asking me for samples or seedlings to try," Dapper Blue explained. "Especially among the nobility who fancy themselves amateur horticulturalists." He meaningfully did not roll his eyes. "I keep some bags of seeds sorted out in advance-- I try to persuade them to try their hoof at the NON magical varieties first." He shook a bag meaningfully. "OF course there's always the occasional upper crust elitist who is more insistent---" he cocked an eyebrow as he put the rest of the bagged seeds away. "I do believe Prince Blueblood's flower gardening hobby is going to be, how shall we say, a full contact sport next spring...."
They snickered, thanked him and tucked the paper bags in their panniers.

Dapper watched as Mudpuppy carefully tucked the paper bag away in her saddlebag. "So. Nervous about the parade tonight, your Highness?" he asked.

Mudpuppy gulped, blushed and nodded speechlessly. Sweetiebelle on the other hand got giddy at the mention of the upcoming festivities. She proned in place gleefully. "Oh, it's so exciting! Neigh Orleans is making you the Princess of the Parade! You're going to ride on the biggest float with the King of Carnival, and Rarity is making you an absolutely BEAUTIFUL gown, and..." she suddenly stopped and giggled. "And they're making Rarity, Pinkie, and Princess Luna your ladies-in-waiting, which is SO funny--"

Mudpuppy nodded again and gulped. That was half of what was making her nervous. The ponies of Neigh Orleans were so carried away with Mudpuppy becoming a princess, they were making three real princesses dress up like her servants for the parade! Oh, that couldn't be going over well...
Mudpuppy had met Princess Pinkamena and (gulp) Princess Luna shortly after their ship had arrived. They hadn't looked mad... at least, Princess Pinkamena hadn't, of course she seemed to be happy and cheery all the time, and besides she was too busy snarfing her way through a King Cake singlehoofed... but the mysterious Princess of the Moon, it was hard to tell. If Mudpuppy was being honest, she seemed more puzzled by the Mardi Gras goings-on. Particularly on why ponies had showered them with shiny bead necklaces, and other odd things. She was particularly confused by the coconut...

"You have nothing to worry about, your Highness," Dapper Blue reassured her, his voice calm and confident. "You just sit on the float in your gown, wave to all the crowds, look pretty and smile. That's all anypony wants a brand new Princess to do." She looked up and smiled weakly. "See? You've got the last two down pat already." That got a much warmer smile from the gangly filly.

The speakers overhead suddenly crackled. "Hello? Hellooo? Is this the greenhouse? Is this thing working?" There was a sound of clicking, as if somepony was rapidly pushing several buttons over and over. "Confound it-- is--(pop crackle) even on?---(click click click) the little light is on (tap tap) is it supposed to be blinking?(fweeee) I didn't WANT general quarters, I was trying to reach... (clack) will somepony put some damned LABELS on all these buttons and switches? Modern convenience my diamond-dappled--- oh BLAST it. Listen, whomever is listening, please tell Princess Nectura and Duchess Sweetiebelle they need to go straight to Mystique's Boutique for their final fittings..."

Dapper slapped a hoof on the 'reply' button. "They're on their way, your Highness," he said smoothly. He carefully ignored the three foals cracking up behind him.

"Dapper Blue? Is that you? Oh good then. Hurry up darlings, times a-wasting. You too, Twig dear--your costume needs a few stitches here and there too. T.T.F.N.!!" There was a moment or two of silence. "Ooo, better finish off this croissant and coffee and get on the go..." followed by loud chewing and slurping noises, followed by a sonorous burp. "Urp. Ugh, cream cheese a bit rich--please pretend you didn't hear that, Jasmine. What? What are you pointing at? Is--- of course I switched it off, look it... OH BUCK IT ALL!!" And a loud squawk-clack as the intercom disconnected.

"You'd best be on your way, children," Dapper Blue managed to say, as the children collapsed in a howling heap, tears streaking their faces. "Her Highness is waiting... Go on, shoo now." The three staggered to their feet and, leaning on each other, made their way to the exit.

Dapper Blue, of course, did not laugh. He was an impeccable professional; he did not, would not and could not laugh. The strain of holding it back, though, would make his joints clack for days.
He could be forgiven in all the distraction for not noticing that he had misread the labels on the seed bags.

Mudpuppy's dress— no, Sweetiebelle corrected herself, Princess Necturus' dress— was as pretty as any she had ever seen; a dream of emerald green silk and tiny pin-sized emerald chips; the tiara a perfect set of cut emeralds in gold. Her hair was once again done up in a tumbling waterfall of green locks. She was a vision, as Rarity would say.

Oh, the other Princesses were just as pretty, of course. Though it was funny seeing Princess Luna dressed in a costume that, for all the purple ruffles and glitter, was clearly made for a Lady-in-Waiting. Sweetiebelle had caught the moon princess frowning and had been worried... but it turned out that Luna had been staring in puzzlement at a coconut for some reason. Didn't they have coconuts back a thousand years ago, or something?

They were all Ladies-in-Waiting, actually, even Rarity. Well not Twig, obviously; he was dressed as a pagecolt. But the rest of them, Sweetiebelle included, were all in flower-like dresses in purple, green and gold. Rarity kept complaining that Pinkie Pie and Luna were ruining the lines of their dress with all the chains of beads they were wearing, but nothing she could do could get the two to part with them. Neither of them would say where they got them all.

Sweetie liked her own dress— pale purple with a floaty flower-petal skirt. It was fun to dress up pretty once in a while.

Mudpuppy didn't seem too happy though. No, that wasn't it— it was more like she'd seem happy and excited for a while, and then she'd start looking all worried and, Sweetiebelle didn't know, guilty? It wasn't until they had climbed up on the float (a great big huge thing that looked like a wedding cake crossed with a bayou flower garden) and were waiting to start, that Mudpuppy finally let out what was bothering her. She took her throne next to the King of Carnival (a nice old stallion in royal robes with a handsome mustache and goatee), looked over to Sweetiebelle, and asked, "Aren't you jealous?"

Sweetiebelle blinked. "About what?"

Mudpuppy shuffled her slippered hooves. "Me bein' up here, an' you down there," she said. It was true, Sweetiebelle was sitting at the foot of the throne, rather than next to it. The Princesses/ 'Ladies-in-Waiting' were scattered up and down the sides of the float, ready to wave and toss something called "throws..."

It took Sweetiebelle a moment. "Of course not," she said. "I wouldn't be jealous."

"Why not?" Mudpuppy frowned.

"Because jealousy is when you're afraid somepony's going to take away what you have," Sweetiebelle explained confidently. "ENVY is when you wish you could have what somepony else does . I wouldn't be JEALOUS of you, I'd be ENVIOUS." The King of Carnival snorted and muffled it behind his hoof for some reason.


"--And I'm not ENVIOUS either," Sweetiebelle went on. "Why would I be?"
Mudpuppy rolled her shoulder and looked away, uncomfortable. "Ah doan' know much bout royalty and such what," she said. "But I'd think a Duchess is s'posed to become a Princess, long afore a swamp girl ever was."

Sweetiebelle rested her chin on her hoof. "Yeah, Equestrian royalty is funny like that," she said. "You'd think Celestia would be a Queen by now. Or Princess Luna. And there's another Princess who's now an Empress in the Crystal Empire, kind of... I think... and nopony knows WHY Prince Blueblood is a Prince. I think he should actually be a Duke or something... though I heard Rarity saying that 'Duke' was a misspelling in his case, whatever that means." The King of Carnival began coughing and choking violently into his ermine robe. "I'm sorry your Majesty, would you like a cough drop?" Sweetie pulled a lozenge out of her purse and held it out; the red-faced king kept on coughing but waved it off.

"And then there's the my sister and her friends. They sort of earned it, but at the same time it was sort of an accident... it's kind of confusing at least. I guess..." Sweetiebelle shook her head. "I guess what I mean is, in Equestria being a Princess can be something you earn, or something that's given to you, or something that just happens. It can mean anything, and maybe someday it won't mean anything at all. I guess getting it isn't anywhere near as important as what you do with it when you get it? Anyways, there's no reason in Equestria why I should become a Princess, any more or less than you. So why be envious?"

"You ain't? Not even a little?" Mudpuppy pressed. "Don't you dislike playin' second fiddle?"

Sweetiebelle chewed her lip. "Maybe just a little," she admitted. "I mean, I'd like to be a princess I suppose. But what good would envy do me?

"Besides I'm kind of used to it. I'm not the brave cutie mark crusader, or the tough one, or the handy one. I'm just, you know, the one who's there. Generally trying to talk Scootaloo out of whatever we're gonna try next." She rumpled her nose while Mudpuppy giggled. "And... well you've seen Rarity. You can imagine what it's like growing up with THAT as your big sister. Sometimes I got so envious of her... and jealous too, yeah. Sometimes it seemed like all she had to do was walk in the room and I would just disappear..." she looked down and stubbed her hoof against a corner of the float.

"But... Princess Luna helped me learn... It wasn't worth it. Being full of envy and jealousy all the time didn't get you anything you wanted... And sooner or later it took the things you did have away. Like the ponies you cared about. And nothing's worth being that jealous over." Sweetiebelle looked up and smiled, remembering what else Princess Luna told her. "If I'm not in the spotlight yet, it just means I'm waiting in the wings for the right time. Till then it's almost as much fun helping other ponies stand there."

Her smile was sincere and artless as a newborn foals'. It was then that Mudpuppy knew that whatever else might be, Sweetiebelle was a true and genuinely good friend. "You are one of a kind, Sweetiebelle," she said.

"Phsa, wat de hold up, up dare," Twig griped. "We goin' or not?" Of everyone on the float, Twig was probably the least pleased; he had ended up dressed in a pagecolt outfit that made him look, in his opinion, "a right Coo-yon."

"Don' get the cabris, Twig," Mudpuppy said. Up ahead a whistle blew; the band struck up and the float began to roll forward. "Up, ere we go! Laissez les bon temps rouler!!" she shouted, and ponies up and down the line cheered their approval.

The parade was wild; the wildest thing Sweetiebelle had ever experienced. The band, the music, the
costumes, the dancers, the floats— it was a whirl of colors before and aft. Everything glowed with
fairy lights, and the night sky overhead was filled with an unending volley of fireworks. The ponies
lining the streets were as colorful as anything in the parade, dressed in costumes and masks like
nothing she could have even dreamed. Even the buildings were decorated with strings of lights and
paper lanterns... everywhere she looked it was a kaleidoscope of light and color and merrymaking.

"De throws, Sweetiebelle, de throws!" Mudpuppy said. She threw a hoofful of bits over Sweetie's
head, out to the crowd. Her memory jarred, Sweetiebelle jumped and looked at the plastic buckets of
"throws" around her; candies, beads, even bit pieces. She scooped a hoofload of things to toss and
hefted them.

"Go light on them at first, Duchess," the King of Carnival told her in his deep, basso voice. He
smiled at her. "They got to last the whole parade." Sweetiebelle nodded skeptically. She had trouble
thinking they were in any danger of running out early; the bucket next to her could better be termed a
barrel. But she obeyed and pared it back... a little. She flung the beads and candies out over the
crowd; cheers went up and a mad scramble took place. Sweetie looked around; the others on the
float were in on the act too. Rarity was flinging bit pieces with grandiose flair; Luna was alternating
tossing armlloads of little wrapped cakes-- and staring at them oddly. While Sweetiebelle watched the
lunar princess broke down and sneaked one or two for herself. Sweetiebelle looked in her own tub
for the silver wrapping. She pulled it out and read the label:

MOON PIE.

Sweetiebelle giggled and tossed it out into the crowd.

Pinkie Pie was throwing shiny bead necklaces in every direction... several of them though seemed to
be flying back. It took Sweetiebelle a second to see why. There was a shriek of outrage from Rarity.

"PINKIE! Stop waving your derriere at the hoi polloi!"

Pinkie was apparently in a mischievous mood, though. She stuck out her tongue at Rarity and
deliberately waggled her rump all the more. "Sunshine sunshine ladybugs awake--" she sang.
Stallions in the crowd hooted and whistled and sent necklaces arcing through the air. Pinkie Pie spun
around and deftly caught them on her horn, letting them swing down around her neck to join the
growing stack.

"Luna, do something!" Rarity pleaded. No flashbulbs had gone off yet but it was a matter of time...

Luna looked affronted. "This shall not stand!" she said.

"Thank heaven--"

Luna stroked her own few beads. "I am NOT about to be outdone by my own apprentice!" She
promptly hopped up and, to Rarity's thunderstruck horror, began shaking her money maker. The
hoots and whistles turned to a roar, and beads began flying.

"This is a NIGHTMARE!" Rarity wailed, covering her eyes with her hooves and flopping to the
floor of the float in a mock faint.

"Well she is the Princess of the MOON," Sweetiebelle shouted to her sister, busting a gut laughing.

Fortunately for Rarity's sanity, Luna and Pinkie settled down after a couple of blocks,... probably
because they were so draped with necklaces they could barely move. They shed most of their, ahem,
booty and returned to tossing treats and coins with the others.
The parade wound on, passing back and forth through the streets of Neigh Orleans. It was near the halfway point, two hours on. Maybe it was Sweetiebelle's imagination, but it seemed like their float got the most cheers... and they all seemed to be directed at Mudpuppy. The cries of "Bon Vive, Mon Princessa Necturus" went up over and over. Sweetiebelle was beginning to wonder if the cajun ponies were ever going to stop celebrating "their" Princess.

*Considering ponies still celebrate Celestia and Luna, probably not.* The thought pleased her.

It was then that she noticed that the cheers up ahead had turned into screams.

The parade halted. Alarmed, Sweetiebelle jumped up and tried to see what was going on. Two blocks ahead, dozens of ponies dressed in zombie costumes had surrounded a float of a giant laughing court jester. They were climbing up the sides, attacking the ponies riding it and rocking the whole float back and forth. Ponies were screaming and running away; why were they running away? Why wasn't anypony stopping the vandals?

It was only when one of the zombie ponies staggered forth and his front leg fell off that Sweetiebelle realized heart-freezing horror *that they weren't wearing costumes.*

More and more zomponies appeared, seeming to come out of nowhere; it took Sweetiebelle a second to realize they were coming out from under the jester float. "They're comin' up through the sewers!" somepony screamed. They were right. Up and down the street she could see sewer lids being shoved up and aside by gray-green, rotting hooves, and more zomponies clumsily climbing out. The crowds surged in panic.

Luna vanished in a cloud of indigo smoke, her costume and beads falling into a pile on the float. She reappeared in midair, horn blazing. "To arms, my ponies, to arms!" Guardponies appeared as if from nowhere, leaping from their places hidden among the crowd. The unicorns and earth ponies were pinned by the mob, but the pegasi formed on Luna as she led the attack, swooping down on the Jester float and its shambling horrors.

Pinkie Pie and Rarity were airborne next, joining the fight. Rarity had few tricks in her magical repertoire, Pinkie even less, but Rarity telekinetically sent volleys of "throws" from the cart at the monsters at cannonball velocity, and while Pinkie only managed a few pops and sparkles, they were pops and sparkles on alicorn scale-- more than enough to send zombie mares and stallions flipping through the air like tiddlywinks.

Then the Carnival King's float shook, and there was a loud grating sound from below, and Sweetiebelle realized *they must have stopped right on top of one of the sewer lids.* "Everypony get off the float!" she screamed-- but it was too late. Creatures crawled from under the toppling float and surged up the sides.

But these weren't zombies. It took Sweetie's fear-scattered brain a second to piece together the webbed hands and feet, the enormous tortoise shell, the limp, mosslike hair, the inverted bowl tied down to the top of the head, the sneering, reptile face--- "KAPPAS!" she shrieked, her voice piercing through even the din around her.

The members of the Radiant Guard, riding in concealment on the float, gave their best. Blades, hooves, and spells flew, and more than one kappa was put down fast and hard. But there were over a dozen of the monstrously strong swamp monsters, and between them and the zombies right on their webbed heels, the pony protectors were overwhelmed.

Mudpuppy and Sweetiebelle clutched each other in terror. Twig launched himself at the first kappa up the side of the float, biting and kicking; the King of Carnival bravely stood between the fillies and
the monsters and clouted about him with his scepter, but the kappa merely swatted them aside like flies.

The last thing Sweetiebelle saw was a burlap sack descending down over them.

Princess Luna raged as she circled over the sight of the assault, searching for a new target to blast or trample. "Cowards! Vermin! Brigands!" she shouted till the windows on Bourbon Street rattled. "They attack, and flee? I shall run the dark wizards who did this through with mine own horn!"

Mere minutes into the battle, the attacking zombies and kappa had turned and fled, diving back down into the sewers from whence they came. Pursuit had been brief and futile; the centuries-old sewer system under Neigh Orleans was a branched and tangled maze of tunnels old and new. They turned back after a few hundred yards; there was damage to clean up and injured ponies to tend.

Cleanup of the zombies was mercifully tidy; once the things were sufficiently damaged-- meaning, generally, decapitated--- they crumbled to bits. Even the bones were reduced to brittle crumbling ruin, leaving nothing but mundane soil.... every fume of the foul energies that motivated them exhausted with their demise. The workers assigned to the grisly task of cleanup simple swept the remains back down into the sewers from whence they arose.

Injuries were numerous, but few severe. Some ponies had been bitten, and had to be reassured that no, they were not going to "turn"-- drat that sensationalist RoMareo for muddling the folklore with his schlock movies---- though they would have to endure a long course of antibiotics; Zombie mouths and teeth were predictably foul. Most of the injuries, in fact, had been ponies being trampled by the panicking crowd.

Luna let herself fume a bit more, then circled down to land next to the battered remains of the royal float. The Radiant Guard and the Bouncer Brigade were both there, looking shamefaced and distraught. "Ve are ashamed, Princess--" Hans said.

"So ashamed," Frans picked up. "Ve tried to reach ze float, but ze crowds--"

A battered Dapper Blue and Jade Blossom stepped forward to take the blame as well. "The fault lies with us, Highness," Dapper Blue said unhappily. "We were grievously unprepared---"

"Be at ease, my little ponies," Luna said. "This attack was utterly unprecedented. One cannot predict the unpredictable, by definition. You did everything by the book."

"Rest assured, Highness," Dapper Blue said, his voice tight, "That there will be quite a number of new pages added to that book when this is through." Terse nods of agreement came from all around; Hans and Frans settled for smacking one hoof into another for emphasis.

An emergency medical pony was tending to several of the guard; at the moment he was looking after young Twig and the King of Carnival. Twig was suffering a sprained front leg, and the King of Carnival had taken a nasty blow to the head. The king tried to sit up. "Your Highness, I'm sorry, I tried--"

Luna gently pressed him down with her magic. "You have done well, King Carnival," she said with a surprisingly gentle smile. "I saw, you struck about you most doughtily. Had you been better armed, you would have given more than one of the foe a true reckoning."

The Mardi Gras grandmaster of events blushed at the praise, but his expression did not grow less
grim. "I thank you for the kind words, your Highness," he said. "But the consequences are grim. The brutes-- the brutes foalnapped Princess Necturus and Duchess Sweetiebelle!"

"I know," Luna said grimly.

If the King of Carnival was distraught, Rarity was beyond devastation. "Who did this?" she cried. "Why would they do this?"

When Luna spoke she wasn't speaking to any of them in particular. "First hinkypunks, then kappa, and now zombies," Luna said darkly. "I was a fool not to realize the first two might be connected. But with the third? It now becomes clear that somepony has been dabbling, and more than dabbling, with powers dark and foul--- and for a very long time.

"The question, fair Rarity, may no longer be whom--- but what."

The ride in the burlap sack was horrible in the extreme. The two fillies were tumbled together like wash in a laundry bag, and carried draped over a hard, shell-covered shoulder. Noxious stinks seeped through the bag, making them gag and retch; all around them they could hear the slap of webbed feet in water and the horrible moaning of the zomponies.

The first leg had been the roughest; they had been abruptly plunged underwater and, for an unspeakable fifty seconds of drowning terror, they had felt themselves and their captor being rushed along by a roaring torrent of vile-tasting water. Just as Sweetiebelle had been about to black out, they had been dragged up into the air and slapped roughly through the bag till they coughed and breathed again.

Then had begun the long trek through what had to be the swamp, if the sounds and smells Sweetiebelle could make out could be guessed. It had gone on forever; Sweetiebelle was bruised and battered and exhausted, and she was certain Mudpuppy was the same way too.

Finally, though, they arrived. They were dumped roughly out of the sack onto the soggy ground. Webbed, clawed hands tied them up in lengths of rotten rope, and forced rings-- repressor rings-- down over their horns. They struggled, but they might as well have been newborn kittens for all the good it did.

Sweetiebelle sat up and took stock of their surroundings. It was the swamp, all right; they were sitting on a low hillock, surrounded in every direction by dank waters, tall drooping trees and what looked like the crumbling ruins of buildings scattered here and there. She could see faint lights-- hinkypunks?-- flitting through the ruins and the trees, and the silhouettes of countless lurching zombies wading listlessly through the bog.

Right in front of them was an enormous manor, an old plantation house that was sagging into rot and ruin. One end of it dipped lower than the other, as if it were a schooner slowly sinking to its doom beneath the waves. Despite its decrepitude several lights could be seen glimmering fitfully in the windows, and fitful streamers of smoke drifted from the one un-crumbled chimney. The front lawn, such as it was, was illuminated by lanterns, almost hypocritically cheerful in their warm glow.

The biggest of the kappas sidled up to the front door and rapped on it with its gnarled knuckles. There was a commotion inside, the sound of a voice, and the door opened. Sweetiebelle couldn't see past the glare of the porch light. "You are back. Did you succeed?" the voice said. it sounded soft and impatient, stressed and urgent.
The kappa gargled and hissed.  


The boss kappa returned to the two fillies and picked them up. He loped into the ruined manor and, almost disdainfully, dumped them on the floor. "Now leave us," the voice said. The kappa snarled, but left. The door crashed shut behind him.

The two fillies sat up and looked about. Sweetiebelle swallowed in fear. They were in a large, mildewed room, lit with oily yellow lamplight. Beakers and tubes and bubbling flasks lined every shelf and table. Stacks of ragged books and scrolls were stuffed in cubbyholes. There were dozens of shelves covered with enormous jars--- bigger than the pickled egg jar in Daddy's favorite restaurant, and that was almost big enough to hold her--- with horrible looking dead things, at least she hoped and prayed they were dead, floating inside. It was a mad scientist's lab, straight out of the movies and about ten billion times more horrible in real life.

There was a pony at the end of the room, tinkering with something one of the racks of beakers and burners. His back was turned to them. He wore a ratty old longcoat draped over his shoulders, and a battered top hat that had probably seen better days before either Sweetiebelle or Mudpuppy had ever been born.

The figure finished what he'd been doing, grunted and turned around. He was a yellow green pony with a greenish black mane and a mustache and goatee that drooped like boiled swampweed. There were bags under his eyes so old and dark they looked like blackened bruises in the lamplight. His right cheek was covered by a large, grubby bandage.

As he turned, Sweetiebelle caught a glimpse of his cutie mark through the tears in his coat: a square medicine bottle with a tiny green snake coiled up inside. He limped heavily toward them, walking so badly it seemed almost like he had only three legs under his baggy coat. Sweetiebelle felt her throat close off in terror. She heard Necturus gasp and stiffen beside her as he drew closer. He loomed over them.

"Welcome, Princess Necturus... and friend." He said, giving them a yellow-toothed and utterly unfriendly smile.

"My name is Cotton Mouth."
"Did you know that snake oil once referred to an actual medicine?" Cotton Mouth said. His tone was casual, his voice conversational. "Oh yes. You see, in the Far East they had a medicine, a tonic with genuine beneficial health properties. It reduced inflammation, lowered blood pressure, and so forth. A humble product that the ponies of those lands had used for thousands of years, with quite satisfactory results. It was made from, among other things, the rendered fat from a particular breed of water snake that lives there.

"Well, when the tonic was brought from the Far East to Equestria by emigrants, some hundred or so years ago, it became very popular with those they sold it to. Ponies were eager for the recipe, so the Far Eastern ponies obliged. They included all the information in the recipe—except they forgot to list what type of snake they used. So tonic salesponies who didn't know better used substitutes---rattlesnake, most often---and watered down the brew with copious amounts of whiskey for, haha, 'added medicinal benefit.' The resultant brew was, of course, medicinally useless.

"Well, I suppose unless one wished to anesthetize the patient, if the concentration of alcohol was high enough... but I digress." He leaned over a flask, stirring it carefully as he spoke as the liquid inside changed color. "The point is, well, you can see what the point is. Snake oil became a slang term for fraudulent medical products; potions and tonics of dubious content and nonexistent medicinal virtue, sold by frauds and quacks. Which was something of a tragedy for the few legitimate potioneers out there.

"Thus an entire trade was turned to quackery, and a therapeutic medical marvel was lost for generations---all because of a simple failure of documentation." He lifted the flask up to the light and swirled it about. Whatever he saw didn't please him; he cursed softly and set the flask down on the table. Disappointment was etched in every line of his body for the briefest of moments, then he regained his self-control. "Ironic, isn't it?" He looked over his shoulder at his two captives.

If he was expecting anything resembling empathy, he was in for a disappointment. Both fillies regarded him with fear and loathing, but the alicorn foal, her cheeks were wet with tears and she made no sound. She had shouted her throat raw with cajun curses and profanity long ago. Now she simply stared at him with such naked grief and hate it should have shriveled his soul. "What? Nothing? Ah well--" He lunged forward and yanked a mouthful of feathers out of one of her wings. He spat the bloody feathers out on the floor as she screeched in pain and the other one screeched in rage. "Why did you do that??" the unicorn shrieked, trying to kick at him.

"Because," he said as he carefully bandaged the plucked wing. "I'm not taking any chance that she can get loose and fly away. Sorry about the surprise," he said emotionlessly, "but better to have it happen without warning than lying there waiting for it to happen, no? Like pulling a tooth. I'd reassure you that they'd grow back---well they would---but that's not going to be a problem for you."

He hobbled away from them back to his workbench. After apparently having a second thought, he retrieved the feathers and carefully bottled them. "Waste not want not," he muttered.

The newest princess found her voice again. "My best friend's a cripple because of you," Mudpuppy said, her voice raw and thick with tears and loathing. "My Mama's dead acouse of you. My Papa's dead 'acouse of you. All the foals who woulda been my age are dead because of you. You fils de
"putain foal killer!"

He actually flinched at that, nearly dropping the test tube he was holding, before resuming his work. "You don't know everything you think you do," he said calmly. "I am not a foal killer."

She was shaking but her voice only got louder. "Whassat? Dat you foalnap me an' mah frien', dat you gon' kill us? Why? You reckon you didn't get enough killin' babies, came back to finish the last of us off--??"

"I am not A FOAL KILLER!!" The last was a scream. Bottles and beakers flew off the worktable and smashed on the floor. He wheeled in his seat and lunged for her, stopping just short, his nose an inch from hers as he gnashed his rotting teeth. His eyes were wild with rage.

Mudpuppy's frame shook, but her eyes never left his. When she spoke it was barely above a whisper. "Dere's thirty-five little graves out in de swamp dat say otherwise," she said.

With an inarticulate scream of rage, Cotton Mouth turned and swept the nearest shelves clean. Bottles, tubes, pipes and jars smashed to the floor. He kicked the shelf over for good measure. Then he turned the other way and knocked over another. Glass and noxious fluids sprayed everywhere.

He stood there raging and screaming for a full minute before finally slumping in exhaustion. With a wave of his horn the mess gathered itself up and dumped itself in an empty waste barrel in the corner. The shelves righted themselves, and save for a few stains on the floor it was as if his fit had never happened. But to judge by the full waste barrel sitting next to the empty one, it had happened more than once before.

He picked up something off his worktable; a stoppered flask filled with glowing green liquid. "It wasn't supposed to happen," he said to noone in particular. "None of it was supposed to happen. Why didn't it work, why did it stop working...??" He took a deep breath. "Remember that story I told you-- of course you do, it hasn't been more than ten minutes. Well there was a reason for that.

"I come from a long line of potioneers. My father was one. Ponies who traveled all over the world, gathered recipes for elixirs and tonics and brewed them up to sell to the public. There was a lot of huxterism involved of course, but what we sold might not do you much good but it wouldn't do you any harm... about the equivalent of a shot of vegetable juice or tonic water in a fancy bottle.

But the old man DID know some stuff. Potions and elixirs, formulas he'd picked up from the zebras and the yaks and the buffalo. The real deal, as they say. He experimented a little too--- dabbled on the side, seeing if he could give some old potions new oomph... never came to much, that. But he was happy with his little dabbling ways, and with selling vitamin water and carrot-juice placebos to the public. He left his wagon and all his books and tools to me.

"Me, I was different. I took up the elixir trade, stepping into his horseshoes... but I'd seen what those elixirs and such could do for real. I was fascinated, obsessed. I pored over my old man's notes, squeezed every drop of knowledge from them-- and everywhere I went I dug for more. Old medicine ponies, ancient libraries, forgotten lore...

"Till one day I found an old volume. Ancient as dirt, thousands of years old, with alchemist formulas written in an ancient dialect of equiish. In its tattered pages it referenced... a Vitality Elixir. A supposed marvel from before even the ancient times of the three tribes. It would make any pony who drank it permanently healthier, harder, stronger, more clearheaded; thaumatic energy-- magic-- would flow more freely in their thaumatic conduits and their essence well would be deeper, oh there was no end to the wonders this elixir would supposedly work.
"The wonder of the ages. I had to know. I HAD to know!

"I spent months, years, painstakingly copying, translating and transcribing the tattered pages. Tracking down ingredients, sometimes in books about extinct animals and plants...finding substitutes, mixing, testing, re-testing, brewing again....

"Till I created.... this." He held up the glowing flask.

"And.... and you tested it on those pregnant mares," Sweetiebelle said, horror struck.

"No. I tested it on myself."

"And it WORKED!" he said it, almost triumphant. "It worked. I grew taller, the excess fat I'd carried since I was a foal flushed away, I grew stronger-- nearly strong as an earth pony. My mind felt sharper, clearer than it had ever been before; it soaked up knowledge like a clean dry sponge soaking up water. And my magic... " He chuckled and set a dozen empty flasks, scrolls and books orbiting around him briefly in a casual spiral. "Well that could speak for itself.

"But the doctors, the scholars wouldn't listen to me. They wouldn't even respond to my letters anymore... I needed more if I was going to persuade them.

"But there were still more wonders to uncover. According to what I gleaned from the texts, the Vitality Elixir would have little effect on a pregnant mare--- but that was because all the benefits would be transferred to the unborn foal. They would be born stronger, healthier, more robust in every way.... and the effects would follow them through the rest of their lives. The medical schools might be able to ignore a single stallion who had experienced a sudden burst of intellect and vitality. But a whole bumper crop of super foals?"

"So, brimming with newfound vitality, intellect... and arrogance... I found a small community, well off the beaten path, that was due for a large number of babies to be born soon." He looked at them. "Yes. Yours, Princess Necturus. I sold the Elixir, and then sat back to watch the triumphant results.

"Then the mares started getting sick. This was all wrong. The Elixir was a revitalizer; it should have made their pregnancies easier, not harder.

"Then... then I started noticing my own side effects. Phantom pains, bouts of nausea, weakness. Then... worse things. Much much worse. Then one day I looked in the mirror, and knew. Something-- something had gone wrong. Very wrong." He threw off his coat, tossed aside his hat, pulled the bandage off his face.

The fillies gasped. Sweetiebelle thought she was going to be sick.

A third eye was growing right out of his face. It twitched and rolled and blinked at them in its socket in his cheekbone. The deformity didn't end there. There was a stub of a second horn growing in next to his first. His back left leg was a twisted, malformed stump that didn't quite touch the ground. Small, misshapen lumps that looked almost like wings moved under his shirt, one high up on his shoulder, the other back down his side on his barrel.

"Remember the snake oil, and the water snakes? Something... I had gotten something wrong with the Elixir. Some ingredient I had gotten wrong, some step that was lost in translation... some... substitution I had made that had been completely wrong. The elixir I made, it. .infuses you with life. But it's wild, uncontrolled. Causes things like..." he indicated his own body. "This." His voice cracked.

"When I saw the deformities in my own body I fled... here. I spent months trying everything I could-
- experimenting on animals I caught in the bayou..." he gestured to the rows of horrifying test subjects in jars... "Trying to find a treatment, an antidote, a cure, before it was too late..." he clutched his head in his hooves. "Then the mares started giving birth... the babies started dying... it was too late. I kept working at it anyway, even after there was no point--" he choked.

Mudpuppy stared at him in horror. "Is that... is that what's gonna happen to me an' Twig someday?" she whispered.

Cotton Mouth composed himself. He took one of Mudpuppy's feathers from the stoppered bottle and stuck it in the flame of a nearby candle. It burned with a clear yellow light. Then he pulled out a few strands of his own mane. They burned a sickly green. "Your ascension purged the influence of the Elixir from your body," he said. "If your friend survived this long, it's a fair bet he was purged of it as well." Mudpuppy breathed easier; not much, but some.

"I don't get it," Sweetiebelle said suddenly. Her voice wavered but she still spoke. "Why are you doing this? Why did you kidnap us?"

He gave them a maniacal grin. "Isn't it obvious?" he said. "You, you were taken by accident, mind. Those dullwitted kappas were told to capture the filly on the Royal float; they weren't expecting two. They were after Mudpuppy.

"Because Mudpuppy here-- Princess Necturus---- is the missing key!" At their uncomprehending expressions he went on. "I knew there was at least one foal that had survived the damnable Elixir. But when I learned that you had become an alicorn..." He began giggling, then laughing maniacally. "It all made sense. I had gotten something in the elixir right. The enhancements deformities, the boost in physical and mental and magical energy... It wasn't just a vitality potion, it was an elixir meant to push the body towards ascension. Like, like royal jelly to make a queen bee. The deformities weren't deformities, at least not all of them---- they were the body trying to grow the organs an alicorn needed---- like wings--" the misshapen lumps under his shirt moved. "Or horns with richer levels of alicorn and denser thaumatic fibers... the fringe theorists were right, all ponies have the potential to become alicorns somewhere within them. They just need... a catalyst.

"But without that certain something, without sufficient amounts of that X factor present when a pony properly ascends---- the metamorphosis stalled out. Except for you." He was practically shaking with glee. "Somehow, you were different, and that difference is the key to fixing the Elixir---- and unlocking the secret to immortality! I can undo this... I can fix... can fix everything, make everything right..." His glee suddenly turned to anxiety. "If... if he only gives me time..." He fretted back and forth. "If I can get some samples, run some tests, before he loses patience.."

"He who?" Sweetiebelle asked.

He stopped and looked at her. he chuckled hollowly. "Oh, did you think I was in charge here?" he said. "That all those zombies and kappas were mine? I hate to disappoint you, little filly, but I don't know a lick of necromancy." He gave her a rot-toothed grin. The candles all flickered suddenly. He looked up, suddenly fearful. "In fact it looks like you're about to meet the real master of Port Malfou." Hastily he took them and stuffed them into a wooden cage, locking it with a hoof-sized padlock. "Be still if you want to take your next breath," he said ominously. He threw on his hat and his tattered coat, and stood in the middle of the room, bowing towards the door.

Sweetiebelle had felt Mudpuppy stiffen at the name of the village. "What's Port Malfou?" She whispered.

"I heered of it from Meemaw," Mudpuppy whispered back. "Two, three hunnert years back, it was a big city on de river. It was big an' rich, but dey say all sort o' wickedness go on there in de back
alleys an' behin' close doors where nopony see. Den one day, an earfquake hit, an' de land under it turn to quicksand-- an' De whole city, an' everypony in it, two thousand souls, sink right down into de swamp." Mudpuppy swallowed Sweetiebelle couldn't help notice that her accent got thicker the more scared she got. "Dat mus' be where we at. Dis mus' be de las' buildin' left of dat whole city...

Sweetiebelle noticed that it had gotten unnaturally silent. The sounds of the swamp, the croaking of frogs and chirping of insects, had halted. "Not quite," Cotton Mouth said. "It wasn't any earthquake that sank Port Malfou into the swamp. It was him." The air seemed to throb like a heartbeat. Light, like faint summer lightning, pulsed outside in the cloud shrouded dark.

"Why?" Sweetiebelle said, horrified.

"Because he needed materials to work with," Cotton Mouth rasped, his eyes never leaving the door. "Did you think those zombies and kappas and hinkypunks outside were made from mud pies?"


The heat lightning pulsed again. "Cotton?" a voice outside called out. It sounded old, ancient, more ancient than Granny Smith, more ancient than mummy dust. And something about it sent frissons of terror racing through Sweetiebelle's body.

"Cotton?" The voice called out again, louder. The witchlight pulsed outside the windows.

"A-a- n-n-ecromancer..." Sweetiebelle croaked, shaking.

"He's not just a necromancer," Cotton Mouth croaked back. She saw him lick his dry lips. "He's a lich."

"COTTON!" The voice screeched, the illusion of patience all gone. The evil light flared, turning the windows white, seeping through the cracks round the door.

"Enter, master," Cotton Mouth called out and crouched lower. "You are welcome as a guest in my home."

The door swung open, and admitted a horror.
Chapter 42

Sweetiebelle didn't scream. She wouldn't, couldn't scream.

Despite everything, despite all she had been through in her short life, she had never had a nightmare, either waking or asleep, more frightening than this. She was someplace so far beyond fear she didn't even know what to call it. She and Mudpuppy huddled together in their cage, utterly frozen.

The creature that strode in through the door was a horror. It looked like a pony, barely. It was pony-shaped, at least. It had no mane or tail and its fur was little more than ragged scraps. It's bare, gnarled, scarred skin stretched over gaunt strings of muscle and knobbled bone. It had no face, as if it couldn't bother with pulling flesh up over the bare skull. Tiny, shrunken eyes glittered wetly in the depths of its eye sockets and wept steady trickles of St. Elmo's fire.

In hideous parody of an alicorn, it had both horn and wings— if you could call them such. Not merely one horn, but a line of them. A single large adult horn in the front, and short stumps trailing in a line down the back of its skull like a mohawk, sticking out through the few wisps left of its mane. It had thestral wings.. or the webless, sinewy parodies of them, that rather than stretching out in long thin wing bones, ended at the wrists in foot-long clawed fingers, with which it clutched and pulled at things around it. It wore a long, mildewed cloak that had been out of style among the aristocracy for at least a century or more, and clutched a skull-topped staff in one of its ghastly pseudohands.

Where the ragged cloak did not cover, Sweetiebelle could see tubes of fluids, strange bolted-on devices, and long, crude sutures. Even from here she could hear the clicking and wheezing of the odd devices bolted onto its body. She realized with a shock that she was seeing Cotton Mouth's handiwork on the creature, here. What was Cotton Mouth doing to him?

"Lord Malifec," Cotton Mouth said. "Welcome..."

He strode into the laboratory, skeletal head raised haughtily. A zombie honor guard, draped in the rusted remains of their armor, accompanied him, and stumbled their slack jawed way, one to each corner of the room. The stink of their sickly green flesh mingled with the chemical smells of the laboratory, making Sweetie and Mudpuppy's eyes water. Each one was trailed by a faint, blue-white flame of swamp gas, like the lost flame of a bunsen burner. It trailed behind them, flickering.

"So you have procured the alicorn foal?" Malifec said. In reply Cotton Mouth nodded toward the foals' cage. Malifec approached the cage, his bony hooves clacking on the wooden floor. "Eh? Two of them? Ah, I see... dullwitted kappa. Couldn't tell one from the other could they? Meh..." His eyes slid off Sweetiebelle as if she had ceased to exist, and fell on Mudpuppy. "Oh yes," he crooned. He reached through the bars with one wing-claw and seized Mudpuppy by the chin. "Yes, yes, it's true. Your little potion DID create an alicorn, didn't it, Cotton Mouth?" He cackled. "Perfect!"

"Oh yes, little filly," Malifec said, leering as he brought his head close to the bars and pulled her face in close. Sweetiebelle could see wisps of smoke drifting up from his false fingertips. He noticed it and chuckled. "See that? Were you a few years older, I suspect your aura would be quite unpleasant for me to touch. But you are still far too young, far too weak.... and once I have subsumed you, I will be immune to it.

"Oh yes, you are going to be the means to restore me to my full glory—Your flesh and blood and bone will be used to finally perfect this body... and I will be master in the realm of life AND death—"
Mudpuppy hawked and spat right in the lich's face.

Malifec didn't even twitch as the spittle trailed down his bony face, sizzling. "Still full of 'pluck,' I see," he said with a faint sneer. "Good for you, I'm sure. Shouting in defiance or screaming for mercy, your end will be the same.

"I'm sure you're hoping your alicorn sisters," he spat, "will come to save you in the nick of time." He released her chin with a jerk. "You might as well give up that silly hope. I made the lovely parish of Malfou Unchartable centuries ago, and have been reinforcing it ever since. Not even Celestia herself could find this village now."

Sweetie's eyes went round at this. Making a plot of land Unchartable was simple, if expensive in power; it was a variation on the same method that was used to make rooms larger on the inside than on the outside. It gave the plot of land a half-twist through time and space, making it all but impossible to find, or escape from, if one did not know the exact direction to go and place to turn. Mostly it was used to make hidden compartments in furniture or secret rooms; to do so to an entire city required incomprehensible power. If Malifec had made all of Malfou disappear like this, there was no chance of the two fillies finding the narrow keyhole out if they tried to escape.

He seized the cage in his magic and wrenched it up off the floor. "Oh yes," he said, leering at the two terrified foals. "You are our guests now... from now... ON." His breath, hot and foul and reeking of embalming and the grave, washed over them.

For Sweetiebelle, it was finally too much. She toppled to the floor of the cage as the world went dark.

"Ready my chamber, Cotton," she heard the Lich say. "I wish to be replenished one last time..."

When Sweetiebelle came to, they had been moved once again. They were now in a circular stone chamber, as big around as the old Golden Oaks library had been, in the center of the room was what looked like a huge iron coffin, resting on a platform. The top was sealed with glass, and inside Sweetiebelle could see Malifec. Wires and tubes of oozing liquid were stuck all over him, pumping fluids from dozens of bottles and barrels around the base of the coffin into his body. He was lying still, hooves crossed over his chest, as if he were dead or asleep.

Mudpuppy was awake, too. Say what you will, Mudpuppy had all sorts of pluck. She was busy trying to use one of the rough, rusted bars of the cage to wear through the ropes on her forelegs. Silently she looked at Sweetiebelle and nodded her head at Sweetie's own ropes. Sweetie got the message and rolled to the other side of the cage to try and saw through her own bindings.

She nearly let out a squeak when she saw one of Malifec's zombies standing right next to the cage. Fortunately she stifled it in time. She lay there barely daring to breathe, watching the zompony for any sign it noticed her. The creature continued to stare listlessly at the center of the room, no sign of awareness on its slack-jawed face.

For a moment Sweetiebelle's curiosity overcame her fear. She looked over the zombie pony-at-arms. Its armor was rusted to ruin. Its horn, she noticed with a squeamish lurch, had been sawed down to a stub; she had a sudden notion where Malifec had gotten his row of horns from. The swamp-gas flame that seemed to follow all his undead hovered next to it, billowing weakly in the dark.

Something about that flame was odd. Sweetiebelle peered at it closer. It almost looked alive, the way
it moved and twisted about; every now and then she could catch a glimpse of-- a face--

She gasped silently. It was like looking at a picture with a hidden image; once you focused your eyes just right, it just snapped into focus. The flame had a face of a pony. Sometimes it gazed listlessly off into space, other times it seemed to twist and turn in every direction as if the pony was lost, or looking for something... "Please," she whispered to the flame. "Please, can you hear me? Can you understand me? Please, we need help..."

"They can't hear you," somepony said. Sweetiebelle yipped and looked in the direction of the voice. It was Cotton Mouth, wheeling a trolley laden with beakers and other tools through the door. Sweetiebelle could see the lab on the other side before he kicked it shut. "They're as blind and deaf to this world as if they had truly crossed over to the other side. Good on you for figuring it out, though. And nice try."

"Why... why.." Sweetiebelle couldn't finish the question.

Cotton Mouth shrugged as he moved about the room, setting things in place. For what, Sweetie didn't care to know. "Malifec's magic can keep the bodies... well... ambulatory," he said. "But without a soul, a spirit to motivate them, they'd just stand in place till they rotted away. The trapped souls are 'asleep'.... they cannot see or hear or feel the living world, but they give the body enough of a mind to remember how to walk, move about, respond to simple instructions, that sort of thing."

"That's horrible," Sweetiebelle whimpered.

"How astute of you." Cotton Mouth said, grunting as he pushed an enormous vat into the room. "to figure out that the activities of a Lich and his slave might be unsavory."

"Slave?"

"Do you think I'd still be here if I had free will?" Cotton Mouth snapped. "Oh don't go flinching and looking at him-- he's not going to wake up for some time yet. And yes, slave. I stumbled into this ruin by accident-- damn his hinkypunks, fifolets, whatever you call them and no, you don't want to know how he makes them-- and thought I'd hide here. I hunker down in this rotting old mansion just in time for him to come back and catch me. He's done... things... to me that bind me to his will as sure as if my bones were chained to the floor."

"What does he need you for, anyway?" Mudpuppy said. She never stopped sawing. "Liches are immortal, ain't dey? Live forever?"

"Yes. Technically." Cotton Mouth said as he bolted pipes and tubes onto the vat. "If you can call it alive. They can't feel anything. Taste anything. Food is like ash in their mouths, they can't feel summer sun or cool breeze. Can't even walk in places bathed by sun or moonlight-- 's why this place is overgrown and overcast all the time. Even feelings, other than ones of malice, are dulled to them. It's a miserable half-existence.

"And there's another thing they don't tell you in little Lich kindergarten," Cotton Mouth added. "Liches don't heal. Bet he felt like a right plonker after he figured THAT one out. All those promises of eternal life and vast power.... and what does he have to spend more and more of his power on every year? That's right; patching his crumbling body back together." He left, and returned, wheeling more mad scientist gear into place. "For all his power of the undead, he's physically as brittle as any three hundred year old geezer would be."

"That's why he needs you."
"So what, y' gonna cut us up into parts, stitch 'em in to replace what's broken down?" Mudpuppy's voice was scornful, but it shook.

"No." He paused, swallowed as if the words tasted of bile. "That is how he used to do it. He's been luring ponies here with hinkypunks for hundreds of years, for just that. But...He and I developed a better way.

"I can use these machines to melt down living things to raw protoplasm. The 'living goo' in every living thing's cells. He can infuse himself with it, so that his body can sustain itself again, temporarily. It doesn't last long, eventually it wears off.

"But if he infuses himself with the protoplasm of an alicorn... an immortal alicorn.... he'll have a truly living body again." He glanced at Sweetiebelle. "He'll most likely throw you into the vat as well just for luck."

"Then why not...?" Mudpuppy tipped her chin in the direction of Malific's mechanical sarcophagus.

"Because I can't," Cotton Mouth said. "I can't even think about trying it, or the geas punishes me." he shuddered.

"We could."

Mudpuppy's two word reply sent shivers down Sweetiebelle's spine. Could they really? Sweetiebelle knew plenty of fairy tales where the brave little filly stuffed the evil witch in her own oven, or tricked her into eating her own poison apple--- but could she really do something like that in real life? Tip that monster out of his coffin, drive a stake through his heart or, or whatever it was you did to kill a lich? She saw the look in Mudpuppy's eyes and knew without a doubt the little swamp filly could... but Sweetiebelle didn't think she had that kind of cold hard nerve.

He actually seemed to consider it for a second. "You don't have what it takes to kill a lich," he said. "Even if you did, if you could... I would be forced to stop you. And if somehow you managed to do it..." he shuddered horribly... "The curse wouldn't let me die."

"And then you'd have to escape past an army of uncontrolled, rampaging zombies and masterless Kappa, and find your way out of this Unchartable ruin," he added. "I'm sorry. There is no escape. Not for any of us." He went back to his work.

"What are you going to do to us?" Mudpuppy said. He didn't respond.

"He'll be... awake... or whatever he is... in another hour. You'd better make your peace with your Maker between now and then." He left the room, refusing to look at them. The door slammed shut.

Sweetiebelle couldn't help it. She started to cry. She couldn't take her eyes off the horrible machines in the middle of the room, or the horrible undead thing lying in the middle of them. She was so scared she almost wished she'd die just so it would stop.

Mudpuppy hissed at her. "Sweetiebelle!" she said. "I got some o' my ropes loose. Hep me get at my saddlebags."

Sweetiebelle sniffed. "Wh-whuh?"

"My saddlebags. I wore 'em under my gown. Three-eyes didn't check for 'em."

"Why did you wear them under your dress?" Sweetiebelle puzzled as she scooched over.
"Cause only a coo-yon would go anywhere wit'out dey saddlebags full o' usefils," Mudpuppy said. "Now help me!" After a great deal of squirming, rope-chewing, tugging, and whispered oaths, the two of them managed to tear Mudpuppy's skirt away and open one of her saddlebags.

Hope surged in Sweetiebelle's heart; the savvy swamp girl probably had a pocket knife or some matches or some other tool they could use to escape. Her heart plummeted to her stomach when the saddlebag's contents were finally revealed. Nothing was in there but Dapper Blue's bags of seeds, all the little varieties sorted into neat wax packets. She pulled out a packet with her teeth and dropped it on the cage floor. "Great," she muttered. "Maybe Malifec would like us to plant him a veggie garden before he boils us down into goo."

Mudpuppy picked up the packet between her front hooves and looked inside it. "Sweetiebelle," she said oddly. "I don't know much about how you upland folk do your gardenin', so maybe I oughta ask.

"Do you-all used any seeds with faces on them?"

The fillies looked at each other. "Mr. Blue's magic seeds," Sweetiebelle said with growing excitement. "He must have mixed up the bags!"

"I can get 'em growin' lickety sizzle," Mudpuppy said. "We get out of here, find us a some open ground or even a li'l mud, we'll have us a beaucoup arsenal! C'mon, we gotta get out of these ropes afore he comes back!" She set to chewing at the knots in Sweetiebelle's ropes with a will. Sweetie returned the favor.

Minutes crawled and flew by simultaneously. Their jaws and teeth grew sore, and soon Sweetiebelle was convinced that the taste of grimy rope was going to linger forever. At long last, the ropes parted, first hers then Mudpuppy's, just as the door creaked open. Thinking quickly, they both hid the frayed ends of their ropes underneath them as Cotton Mouth came in. "Wakey wakey, Master," he said scornfully, turning a crank on the side of the metal coffin. "I think you'll be awake for this..."

Slowly the coffin righted itself and stood on one end. Pipes and tubes gurgled, and the witchfire started smoldering in the Lich's lidless eyes. The creature toppled forward, its forehooves hitting the damp stone floor with a clack. He looked... still terrible. But at the least, less emaciated, his skin smoother and more supple. "So, it is time then," Malifec said eagerly.

"Yes, Master," Cotton Mouth said. He began plugging new tubes and inserting fresh needles into the undead necromancer's body. Fresh bottles of fluid were added; new potions and elixirs were set to drip. The steel tub next to the coffin was slowly filled with bubbling green ichor. The last bubble bath either of us will ever take, if we don't get out of here, Sweetiebelle thought, and gulped.

"Fetch the alicorn." Cotton Mouth went to the cage, unlocked it, and dragged Mudpuppy out. He got the surprise of his life when the ropes fell away and Mudpuppy hauled off and kicked him right in the knee, he howled in pain and toppled to the floor. "Run!" Mudpuppy shouted.

Sweetiebelle was already moving, seizing the seed packet in her mouth, leaping out of the cage and running as fast as her little legs would go, seeds spilling behind her and scattering across the damp stone floor. They dashed in opposite directions around the room, heading for the one exit from opposite sides.

"Stop her, you fool!" Malifec screeched. Sweetiebelle reached the door. She looked back. Both villains had ignored her entirely and focused on cornering Mudpuppy. She was trapped between them, Cotton Mouth standing akimbo, Malifec at the end of his tether of tubes and wires, his unicorn-horn mohawk crackling dangerously. "Give it up, little filly," Malifec hissed. "You can't fly with
those feathers torn out of your wing. And you can't cast magic with that ring stuck on your horn."

Mudpuppy looked around and saw all the seeds scattered on the wet, muddy stone floor. She smirked at Malifec. "Well, Ah know sumpin you don't know," she said.

"Oh really?" Malifec sneered. "And what would that be?"

"I don't need my horn to cast magic," she said. She stamped on the floor with one hoof. A wave of magic rippled out from her hoof, spreading out across the floor. Seed hulls burst, rootlets probed down into muddy cracks, shoots and leaves reached upward for the light of the lanterns.

"What is this??" Malifec sputtered. Even as he spoke vines coiled up the equipment, the machinery, the walls, even the legs of the zomponies still standing unmoving around the room. Sweetiebelle kicked the door open, letting more light spill into the room. The vines became laden with blossoms and then with tiny green fruits that reddened, swelled...

Yes, thought Sweetiebelle, the chili peppers!

...into red, round fruit with rumpled, scowling faces.

"Tomatoes??" Mudpuppy yelled in exasperation.

"Tomatoes??" Cotton Mouth said in befuddlement.

"Tomatoes," Sweetiebelle facehoofed.

Malifec looked around him as fruiting vines continued to climb up every surface and tangle their way around the machinery hooked to him. Sweetiebelle fleetingly wondered what expression he would have had on his face if he'd still had one. "Is this some sort of joke?" he said.

A joke. At that moment Sweetiebelle remembered two things: a cutie mark crusade she and the others had tried a month ago, when a traveling puppeteer had passed through Ponyville, and a joke. The joke.

Not just a bad joke. The worst, most awful, most terrible joke in the world. The joke that was so terrible she'd never even actually heard the first half; the joke so awful that she'd gotten a spanking and their uncle had gotten thrown out of the house just for teaching her the punch line.

It was perfect. The target was open, the tomatoes were ripe, and she knew what to do. She took a deep breath and her horn lit up.

Malifec opened his mouth to say something, only to have, to his surprise, a dollop of light fly into it and small filly's voice come out:

"THE ARISTOCRATS!"

SPLATS SPLATS SPLATS SPLATS SPLATS SPLATS SPLATS SPLATS SPLATS SPLAST!!

Malifec and Cotton Mouth yowled and disappeared in a torrent of salsa as the trollmato plants lining the room proceeded to force feed Malifec tomatoes at machine-gun speed and velocity. Glass smashed, the steel tub and the coffin dented, and both villains went down in a spray of vegetable guts.

"Cutie Mark Crusaders Ventriloquists, YAY!" Thought Sweetiebelle. "Come on!" she yelled at
Mudpuppy.

Mudpuppy took the hint and ran for the door, dodging trollmatoes and slipping in puddles of raw ketchup. She reached the door just as the tub toppled over, sending Malifec and Cotton Mouth scrambling for their lives as the flesh-dissolving goo spread across the floor. "Come on, that won't stop them for long!" Sweetiebelle said. The two fillies ran out of the chamber of death, out the laboratory door, into the murky night and freedom.

They ran heedless of direction, only seeking to be lost in the swamp and the night. But there was no shelter to be found; any time they found someplace that looked safe in the crumbing ruins of Malfou, they were rousted out by the glowing red eyes of the Kappas in their pools, or the moaning of the wandering zombies as they closed in. It didn't matter where they ran, Sweetiebelle knew. Malfou was Unchartable; their chances of finding the one route that led out of that terrible trap was next to zero. But they ran anyway.

They were almost to the point of exhaustion when Mudpuppy suddenly turned. "This way!" she said, picking up the pace again. Sweetiebelle struggled to keep up with the lanky legged filly. They turned another corner and there it was; a low hillock, surrounded by swamp water and flooded by moonlight. The only thing that stood on it was the crumbling corner of some long-decayed building; all of the rest of the little islet stood grassy and bare in the light. "That's it, that's safe!"

"How do you know?" Sweetiebelle said.

"I... I just do," Mudpuppy insisted. "I can feel it... Come on!"

She was right. One of the features of an Unchartable plot of land was that some part of it had to be a counterbalance. The islet was that counterbalance for Malfou. By a twist in time as well as space, Malifec had turned the swamp-drowned city's dimensions a half-turn, making the entire city and any trace of its existence disappear from outside eyes, even hiding it from the face of the Sun and the Moon; The sky over Malfou was always dark and overcast, and the night was always on the dark of the Moon. But that grassy islet was the fulcrum upon which the Unchartability turned, and was the counterpoint-- there, the sun always shone, and the moon was always full, and had blessed the ground there with their light unceasingly for three hundred years. Its soil was clean of the taint of Malifec's evil experiments, and saturated with light touched by alicorn magic. Malifec's hoof had never trod there, and never could.

They took a brief, terrifying swim through the murky waters surrounding the island, and climbed up the hill on dry land, not stopping till they reached the peak. The two worked together, using their hooves and teeth to pry the magic suppressor rings off each other's horns. They took shelter in the shadow of the cornerstone. "We can rest here," Mudpuppy said. "F'r a little while.."

"And then what?" Sweetiebelle shivered. Something out in the darkness moaned; she pressed in to Mudpuppy's side.

Mudpuppy looked up. The rest of the city was dark and lightless, but once they'd climbed up on the islet they'd been able to see the Moon again. "We can see the moon here," she said. "If we can look up and see the Moon, they can look down and see us."

Sweetiebelle nodded. "So what do we do? Do we light a fire? Malifec and Cotton Mouth will see it too."
"I got an idea," Mudpuppy said. She pulled off her saddlebags. "First we gotta see what Mr. Dapper Blue gave us..."

They were fortunate. The seeds were carefully sorted into folds of wax paper, and unlike the first were properly labeled in wax pencil. The next hour was spent in hasty work, fumbling with shaking horns and hooves as they worked their way around the island, planting seeds in the soft black soil with a sharp stick, scattering others out over the water, laying out row after row till they had worked their way back up to the peak. Somewhere in the middle Sweetiebelle started singing softly, to try and still her frantically beating heart.

"Hush now quiet now

It's time to lay your sleepy head

Hush now quiet now

it's time to go to bed..."

It seemed to help; at least Mudpuppy didn't object--- Sweetie could hear her breathing calm and her hooves move more surely. Her own heart beat a little more steadily. She worked faster.

It had been a long day, and an even longer night. It had been hours since they'd rested, slept, or ate, and they'd not dared drink the muddy water of the swamp. They dug through Mudpuppy's panniers and found, to their less than enthusiastic amusement, a couple of moon pies from the parade, and a single bottle of water. They shared their meager meal and got ready.

"Aright," Mudpuppy said. "Once we starts this Fais Do-Do, dat bone face couillon an' his zombie pets are gonna come runnin.' We goanna hafta hold 'em off till somepony sees all the light and come to save us, or till de sun come up. We put all the sunflowers, the sunshrooms, an' the chili peppers up here closest to us, so's they last longest, and so's we can chunk them lil red devils at 'em. Ifn' it gets real bad, start chunkin' more seeds around an' I'll try an' make e'm grow again. Hokay?" Sweetiebelle nodded, licking her lips.

"Hokay. Let's do this," Mudpuppy took a deep breath. Magic flowed out of her, from her hooves, her wings, her horn, into the air and water and soil around her. In a slowly expanding wave, the hill sprouted, bloomed, grew thick with stems and vines and leaves. A chorus line of sun-shrooms sprouted first, and began spitting out their tiny spores of light. The sunflowers came soon after; motes of light began showering down on the slopes of the little island till it glowed like a bonfire. The plants gulped down the motes of sunshine and grew even faster. Within less than five minutes the moonlit hill was covered with a green army.

Mudpuppy let out a whoosh of air and sat down. Sweetiebelle hugged Mudpuppy in glee. "You did it!" she squealed. But even as she spoke, rustles of discontent began breaking out all up and down the little island. Peas and corn began pelting other plants. Squash began thumping up and down in agitation.

"Oh no," Mudpuppy moaned. "We planted the wrong kinds next to each other! Stop it, Stop it all of you! We all gon' die if de zombies come an you all fightin...." She dashed back and forth, trying to get the plants to stop fighting, to get them to listen to her--- but to no avail. She sagged in despair as their garden kept right on squabbling with itself. "They'll be too busy fighting each other to even notice the zombies coming. What do we do?"

Sweetiebelle looked out over the swamp. She could hear Malifec and Cotton Mouth shouting, faint in the distance, egging the zombies and kappas on. They would see the light of the glowshrooms and
sunflowers soon, and then it would be all over. "No! No, it's not FAIR!" she said, stamping her hoof as she wept tears of frustration and rage.

What could she do? Sing them a Lullabye? What good was that? She knew she was just a stupid filly who couldn't even get her stupid cutie mark, that all she was good for was hanging in the back and trying to talk everypony out of things, only to have them ignore her. Why would anypony listen to her now?

But didn't they understand?... they had to fight together, or they were going to die! They had to listen!

All that anger and pain and need swelled up in her like a balloon. As her horn lit, and a tiny globe of magic the size of a pearl settled on her throat, it came out in the only way it could.

Do you hear the ponies sing

From the mountains to the glen

It is the music of a people

Who will not be slaves again....

The plants stopped fighting. Slowly, rank by rank and row by row, they turned to face her, mesmerized. The flowers and plants around her weren't the only ones; Mudpuppy was staring openmouthed as the tiny, muddy filly sang.

Will you join in our crusade?

Who will be strong and stand with me?

Beyond the end of darkness

Is there a dawn you long to see?

Then join in the fight

For the right to live and be free!

This wasn't heartsong, Mudpuppy knew. Heartsong was something that just happened, that swept ponies up in it, and came and went as it pleased. This was different. This here, Mudpuppy thought with an icy thrill that ran down her spine, this had come because Sweetiebelle had called.

It was saying what she told it to say. And the garden of mayhem around her was listening. Every plant swayed in time. The sunflowers were singing in chorus with her. Even the squash and pumpkins were thumping out the tempo on the soft loam.

Will you give all you can give

So that our banner may advance

Some will fall and some will live

Will you stand up and take your chance?....
And cooee, if Mudpuppy wasn't feeling the rush herself.

...*When the beating of your heart*

*Echoes the beating of the drums*

*There is a life about to start*

*When tomorrow comes!*

"YOU LITTLE VERMIN!"

That falsetto shriek was a show-stopper. Everypony... everyplant.... stopped singing and faced outward into the night. While Sweetiebelle had been singing, Malifec had found them. He was standing just outside of the ring of moonlight, on the far shore, grinding his lipless teeth in rage. His kappas were gathered around him, and Cotton Mouth stood, or crouched, by his side.

"It would seem," Cotton Mouth said, clearly taking effort to project, "That they are inside the Counterbalance, where you cannot safely go, Master."

Malifec glared at his slave and seethed. "You press your luck with your impudence, Cotton," he hissed. He motioned to the Kappa around him with his skeletal wing-hand. "Go! Fetch the one with the wings to me." He looked up at the two fillies. "You may have the other one for yourselves," he leered.

Sweetiebelle shuddered, but she never stopped stamping out the tempo. Neither did the plants. They waited in silence.

The Kappas crawled into the water and began swimming for the island, the humps of their shells and their red glowing eyes showing above the surface. They weren't even halfway when the first one vanished with a yowp and a splash. Then another, and another. One almost made it to shore; it was just within the range of light cast by the torchwood stumps when dozens of tangle kelp vines lashed up out of the water, wrapped around its throat and dragged it to the bottom.

The first line of defense had held.

Cotton Mouth cleared his throat. "It would seem," he said, "That you are fresh out of Kappa, Master."

For a moment it looked as if Lord Malifec would throw Cotton Mouth into the water after them. Instead he held his staff up to the blackened sky and let loose with an inarticulate scream of rage. Lightning lashed from the staff and from his horns, turning darkness into daylight. Then came the moaning.... Out in the distance Sweetiebelle could make out dozens of swamp gas lights slowly making their way towards the little island. Then there were hundreds, rising up out of the swamp water, digging their way up out of the mud.... she remembered what Mudpuppy had said; *there had been two thousand souls living in Malfou when it had disappeared into the quagmire...*

"GET THEM!" Malifec said, pointing. "BRING THEM TO ME!!"

She upped the tempo of her hoofbeat.
Axes flash, broadsword swing,
Shining armour's piercing ring
Horses run with polished shield,
Fight Those Bastards till They Yield
Midnight mare and blood red roan,
Fight to Keep this Land Your Own
Sound the horn and call the cry--

The sunflowers joined in on the final line--- and so did the gourds, the torchwood stumps, the gator plums, everything with a face and a mouth in a boneshaking bass:

**How Many of Them Can We Make Die!**

Zombies by the score waded into the water and approached the island. Dozens were yanked down by the tangle kelp or peppered full of holes by the tiny seashrooms, but the sheer volume of undead won out. As they entered the ring of moonlight they slowed drastically... still, they came on. A hundred or so reached shore and planted their hooves among the potatoes. Had they possessed any free will or minds of their own, they might have questioned why said potatoes had little blinking lights. With a deafening roar the entire first wave of zombies were blown to kingdom come. Bits of undead rained down over the water. The second wave made it to shore in the gaps-- only to be zapped to a jittering halt by starfruit sparks, then mowed down by volleys of flaming peas shot through the wall of torchwood stumps.

"Laissez les bons temps rouler, you fils-putain!" Mudpuppy whooped, and began pouring magic into more seeds and plants.

Spitting with rage, Malifec flung a fireball at the alicorn. Two umbrella palms sacrificed their lives to shield her at the last second. A noxious cloud of poison cast by him was blown away by the spinning leaves of several giant clover. His magic sputtered. He refrained from anything more, cursing in some awful forgotten language.

*He must be usin' nearly all his mojo to keep those zombies moving forward,* she thought. *"Keep it up!"* she yelled, and raced to fill the gaps in the line with more seedlings.

Everything descended into bedlam. Potato mines erupted; pea plants spat torrents of peas that burst into flame, gator plums devoured zombies whole, peppers turned stretches of zombies into charcoal, melons arced through the air, decapitating zomponies, squash gourds hammered zomponies into pulp till they themselves burst. Flame and explosions and produce flying at killing speeds were everywhere, with sunflower seeds raining down in a constant shower and two fillies desperately rushing to fill the widening holes in their defenses with still more magically-sprouted plants. It would have been comical, if not for the soul-numbing horror of the grue and violence and the endless moaning of the zombie horde.

Sweetiebelle sang battle marches till her voice cracked. A watermelon vine cracked open one of its own melons and gave it to her; she ate the cool, wet flesh, slaking her throat, and fed hooffuls of it to Mudpuppy as she cast. They fought on.

The night ground on. The effect on Malifec's shambling hordes was devastating. Dozens, then hundreds of them were crushed, dismembered, incinerated. And still more came on. The garden
army had destroyed hundreds, but Malifec's minions numbered over a thousand... slowly, plant by plant, row by row, they trampled the island's green defenders. The plants were crushed underfoot, torn apart and devoured, and fewer and fewer rose in their place.

Sunrise was still hours off yet, when Mudpuppy sank to the ground, her horn and hooves smoking. "I... can't..." she sobbed for air. "No more..."

"C'mon, just a little longer," Sweetiebelle pleaded, trying to hold her friend up. She was staggering herself. "We're... we're almost there--"

Mudpuppy puffed out her cheeks and strained. Only a few guttering sparks fell from her horn. "That's it," she slurried, tears welling in her eyes. She slumped to the ground, utterly burned out. Sweetiebelle slumped next to her. She had exhausted her own magical well, running back and forth, singing and drilling seeds into the ground.

She looked out over the battlefield; the hillside was covered with crushed plants and scattered bits of zombies. The sunflowers were left; there was a scattering of pea plants, a thumping, half-cracked gourd here, a heroically flinging melon plant there.

And there were still hundreds of zombies still coming.

The last few plants to sprout had been two or three massive black mushrooms that, at the last minute, had detonated all around the perimeter, shattering hundreds of zombies and flinging the horde back a hundred yards. Now there was nothing left between the two fillies and the next wave of shuffling zombies. They had maybe two or three minutes before the undead ponies reached them and...

She flopped down on the ground sobbed. She hurt. She was so tired, and cold, and all she wanted was her mother. The sunflowers crooned around her, confused and distressed. "It's over.... I'm sorry," she said-- to whom she didn't know. She didn't cry. She didn't think she had any tears left.

Mudpuppy whimpered into her side, shaking in fear and pain. Sweetiebelle felt her heart twist in sympathy. It seemed she had a few tears left after all. She offered the only comfort she had left... She cuddled Mudpuppy close and softly sang.

*One day I will be...*

*Back in our old street...*

*Safe from the noise that's...*

*falling around me...*

The air, the swamp, the whole world stilled, as one filly's voice filled the night sky. Her eyes drifted closed as her voice swelled, and the music came out. She did not see the flare of light on her own hip, barely felt the strange lingering sting through her bruises and rope burns as her horn, then her heart, began to glow.

The zombie horde... halted.

"What are you doing?" Malifec snarled. "What are they doing??" he turned to Cotton Mouth. No answer was forthcoming from that quarter; the wretched snake oil salespony was standing there unheeding, tears of guilt and shame and regret pouring from his eyes.
We've been cowering so long

Oh, what I would give,

I ask so little

Oh, what I would give

to stand at the bus stop

Or browse in a bookshop

to sleep and always be still....

The sunflowers joined in, singing in harmony. Sweetiebelle glowed from within as the music poured from her.

The undead stood, transfixed. The soul-flames that attended them congealed, took the form of faces. Mares, stallions, old nags, young foals, all of them listening raptly, their eyes awakening and filling with tears. Imprisoned in their own bodies, they had been unable to see or hear with their own eyes or ears. Not even a heartsong could have reached their hearing. But this went beyond music, beyond mere sound. This was more than heartsong-- it was soul-song. Pure soul-music, pouring forth, carrying all the fear and pain and loss and grief of a lonely, frightened child...

They heard it. And it awoke them to what they had become.

The song rose, spread, filled the sky.... A growing sound came from the zombies; a moan that rose to a wail of anguish, horror and despair as their spirits awoke in the rotting horrors that their bodies had become, as their memories were restored of the monstrosities they had been made to do. As one, their eyes blazing, they turned on Malifec. Spectral voices spoke, and this time Malifec was the one who heard.

"What have you done to me?"

"Monsters! You made us into monsters!"

"Living corpses... oh Maker, the pain--"

"You turned us on our own families!"

"My husband--"

"My sister--"

"My children--"

"You turned us on foals. On Innocent foals!"

"Monster!"

"Villain!"

"Demon!"
Roaring in fury, the zombie horde closed on him, moving with more frightening deliberation than they had in centuries. Malifeec screamed in rage and lashed out with his magic. But irony of ironies, the practice of Necromancy suffers one fatal flaw: all its most destructive spells are designed for afflicting the living-- not the living dead. Lightning lashed from his horns and scored unheeding flesh; poisons and curses to wither living bodies washed over corpses without affecting them; eldritch flames sputtered out, and there were scores of hooves to take the place of those that fell charred to ash.

They mobbed him...and dragged him bodily to the island. "NO, NO!!" Malifeec screamed. But mercy was not forthcoming. He was dragged through the water, and up onto the islet. The moment the moonlight touched him, the instant the sun-blessed earth met his lich's flesh, he began to burn. Rotting hooves held him down to the Sun and Moon-blessed earth, the shower of sunflower seeds was allowed to fall on him unimpeded. He went up like an oil soaked rag dipped in phosphorous.

In moments it was over; the lich crumbled to ash, then less than ash. There was a massive lurch as the whole world seemed to shift sideways; Sweetiebelle staggered. She looked up and laughed; in the distance, flying across the face of the Moon was the Fabulosity; close behind it was the Surprise. The Unchartable spell on the ruins of Malfou had broken.

The living dead gathered around her, almost reverently. She looked up at them. The specters hovering over them smiled at her; some with tears. One of the zombies coughed, moved its lips, and managed to speak.

"W-w-e're sor-re.." it rasped. "Th-thank-- yo-o-u..."

"It's okay, it wasn't your fault," she whispered back. "And you're welcome." The ghost smiled... and its corpse crumbled to dust. All around, zombies began crumbling into piles of earth. Soon, nothing was left but the ghost flames.

Sweetiebelle felt a new song bubbling up inside her. A song of sorrow ending, of gratitude, of farewell, of utter joy. There were no words, and she doubted there ever could be, but she sang anyway. The guttering flames began to close, to swirl around her as motes of light swirling up into the sky.... all of them singing. She joined in, her wordless song blending with theirs, as the light swelled within her--

Mudpuppy stood, gawping at the place where her friend had been. There was a scorched spot of earth, nothing more.

On the deck of the Fabulosity, two alicorn mares suddenly stood straighter as something strummed across the cosmic strings of the universe. "Did you feel that--?" Rarity gasped.

"Indeed I did," Luna said. Over on the deck of the Surprise, Pinkie Pie could be seen hopping up and down manically (even more so than usual) and pointing. They had seen the strange fireworks in that direction earlier; now they could make out a single, pale white star slowly descending. Luna’s smile spread across her face. "Full speed ahead," she said. "The missing foals have been found!"

They flew in over the ruins of what once must have been a fairly sized city, to a hill that glowed in the moonlight. The princesses, heedless of their guard's warnings, took wing and arrived first. Rarity hit the ground at a gallop and was the first to reach them-- two exhausted, muddy and tattered fillies, surrounded by a ragged garden of flowers. She swept them both up in her hooves and wings, hysterical with relief. None of those who gathered around missed the new cutie mark on the half-
conscious little Duchess' flank... or her two tiny, snow white wings.

Luna landed a few strides away. She chose to keep her distance, let the loved ones reunite in relative peace for a moment. She watched as Rarity showering her admittedly over-wrought affections on Mudpuppy as well; it pleased her that the poor foal had found a surrogate mother in the melodramatic fashionista. The filly seemed confused at the attention at first, but was more than happy to accept it.

Luna cast around at the hillside, taking note of the craters and scorch marks, the crushed and mangled plants, and the countless hoofprints torn in the sod. It was with some bemusement she considered the debris. "It would seem there was something of a battle here," she said aloud.

"A bit of one." Her guards whirled on the voice, weapons ready. A badly deformed pony waded slowly ashore, limping on three legs. He dropped his battered silk hat in the mud and knelt before the princess. "I surrender myself to you, Princess Luna."

Luna looked him over. He positively reeked of corruption by dark magic. "What is your role in all of this?" she demanded, her eyes flaring with anger.

He didn't even quail. "Unwilling minion," he said. He pointed to a particularly large scorch mark with a half-crumpled skull sitting atop it. "If you want to see my boss, well-- he seems indisposed at the moment."

Luna's lip quirked at his morbid sense of humor. "And what would you have?"

He lowered his head. "Kill me quickly."

Luna blinked. "You would not plead your case? Plead for mercy?"

He grimaced. Luna saw that he was sweating and holding himself still at a great cost of will; she realized he was in terrible pain. "I may have been a slave but have my own crimes and sins," he said. "The deaths of thirty-five foals is just the start. And after what my 'Master' did to me.... a swift death would be the only mercy." Something bulged and shifted under his coat, eliciting a grimace of pain from him. "He swore that if he perished, that he would see to it that I would never be able to die. No matter how desperately I wanted it...." He hunched over. Luna clearly heard bones crack.

"The vitality elixir I worked on so long," he gasped. "He... altered it, so that it would make my body and organs grow out of control. If he ever removed his influence. Now that he is dead, his powers are no longer keeping it in check...."

"I understand," Luna said. "Do you have any last requests?"

"My research," he said. "You must believe me; I was onto something. Something incredible." The brief gleam of a fanatical researcher flickered in his eye. "It all went wrong for me-- but other researchers, better minds might glean something from it. That would make up for... at least a little of all this." He spasmed and sweated. "All my papers are in the manor-- locked away in a fireproof safe." He grinned sardonically. "I figured on it all ending in pitchforks and torches, decided it would be a shame if all my work went up in smoke..."

Luna nodded. "I will see it done." She lit her horn. "Have you any last words?"

"Just two," he rasped. More bones cracked; half his face swelled. His spine writhed and twisted. He looked up with beseeching eyes. "For as little as they're worth: I'm sorry."

Luna pointed her horn at him... hesitated....
"Do it!" he said.

Moonfire blazed over him. Instantly he was consumed; ash, then less than ash, fell to the muddy grass. Cotton Mouth's long purgatory was finally over.

Sweetiebelle felt herself carried aloft, with the sound of beating wings all around her. She came completely to as the guards carrying her set down gently on the deck of the Fabulosity. When she opened her eyes, there was Rarity and her guards and the rest of the crew.... and two faces she wasn't expecting.

"Momma! Papa!" she cried as the two ponies all but piled into her. She burrowed into her mother's neck as they wrapped her in a three way-- no, a four way, here came Rarity-- hug. "How did you get here?" she squeaked.

"We were passing through Neigh Orleans on our trip and decided to stop and see the sights," Pearl said, sniffing. "When we heard about what happened..."

"Bless the Mayor for getting you to the Fabulosity," Rarity sniffled.

"Guess you got in a little kerfluffle, didja now," Magnum said. He had tears in his eyes and a proud grin on his face. "Lemme take a look at you, shortstop--" he backed up a step and then goggled. "Well ain't that somethin'," he said. He grinned. "...Princess."

"Oh my golly gee!" Pearl added.

"What?" Sweetiebelle looked down at herself-- then her wing wiggled, the feathers tickling her side. She did a double take, carefully stretching her tiny wings out. "Oh... wow." She blinked at her family. "So that's what happened." She turned around in a circle, flapping her wings experimentally, looking herself over. "Oh, omigosh... I got my cutie mark too?"

"Oh goodness gracious let me see!" Rarity squealed. There it was, a pale blue musical note, overlaid on a blue-white star that was framed by a golden laurel wreath.

"Oh I KNEW you were going to get something in music, Sweetiebelle," Rarity gushed. "What's it for, can you tell us?"

"Oh that's obvious, dontchaknow," Pearl scoffed. "It means she's gonna be a big famous music superstar, you betcha."

Sweetiebelle's memory flashed back; to a crowd of smiling, tearful faces, freed by music that only they could hear. Faces that flickered and burned and turned into a cascade of blue-white stars, shooting up into the sky... she smiled sadly at her family. "It... means something very special," she said. "But I... really don't want to talk about it just yet." Then her chin crumpled and she started to cry.

Pearl swooped her daughter up again. "It's all right, Sweetie," she crooned. "You don't have to talk now. You're safe now, you're safe...."

Across the deck another reunion was taking place. Mudpuppy's hooves had barely touched the deck when she was tackled by a frantically babbling Twig. He nearly strangled her as he hugged her. An indignantly squeaking salamander crawled out of his mane, scolding her for dropping him back at the parade...
And there was Meemaw. She hobbled up, her wrinkled face unreadable. "What you gone got into, poor child?" she croaked. She wrapped Mudpuppy in a hug.

"Meemaw! There were kappa. An' zombies... An' a lich-- a right big evil bokor--wicked as de day is long---" Mudpuppy couldn't help it. She just started babbling all that happening. And shaking a little.

"A bokor?" Meemaw Catfish's eyes went wide. She gave Mudpuppy a severe look. "Did ye blow his haid off?"

Mudpuppy gave her a gaptoothed grin. "Sho nuff we did."

Meemaw's face creased into a smile. "That's a good gal," she crooned, patting Mudpuppy on the back with a chuckle.

Mudpuppy's smile faded. "Meemaw... Cotton Mouth was dere."

Meemaw went stiff. "Him??" Her voice was cold.

Mudpuppy shook her head. "Taint no matter, Meemaw," she said sadly. "Ain't no point in hatin' him no more. He did some wicked tings, Meemaw-- but he weren't no monster. Not like dat lich." She shivered; then her eyes turned sad. "He was just a pony dat was full of reckless pride. And he was dat bokor's slave, from the day he ran away till the day he died. That evil creature did awful things to him, Meemaw... " She remembered watching from afar as Cotton Mouth had all but crawled to Luna's hooves, his body twisting itself to pieces, and begged for death, and felt an upwelling of pity. "He spent every minute of his life, all these years, regrettin' his sins. Like you always said, dere ain't no profit in speakin' ill of de dead."

Meemaw didn't say anything at first. Her chin just wobbled a bit, and she gave Mudpuppy another long hug. "You kin come back to de bayou if'n you want, chile," she said. "If you tink you ain't ready for all dis..."

Bruised and battered, exhausted and magically burnt out, Mudpuppy still shook her head. "De world don't ever ask us if we ready for it," she said. "It just shows up one day. I gotta go do dis, might as well do it now." She looked over at Sweetiebelle and her family. "Besides," she said with another gaptoothed grin. "SOMEpony sensible like has gotta look after dese crazy city ponies."
Rainbow Dash chewed on the end of her pencil. It was an old habit that went all the way back to kindergarten and one that wasn't likely to go away— even if she could write using her magic now. Especially since she could write using magic now. Having to be tutored in using her unicorn powers starting at, effectively, grade zero had her feeling like she was back in school again.

Magic wasn't the problem in front of her at the moment, though. She was in her stateroom, going over the itinerary for the next Wonderbolts show with Spitfire. "And you're really sure you wanna move these ponies off the first string roster?" she said to Spitfire.

"I gotta say yes, Highness," Spitfire sighed. "Their performance marks just aren't high enough. They were moved up to first string on a provisionary basis anyway...."

"But their stats are well above average," Rainbow pointed out, tapping the cards in front of her. To Spitfire's initial amusement, rather than using a clipboard or spreadsheet for these meetings Dash had opted to use the latest deck of Wonderbolts bubblegum cards. Her amusement had diminished after the first meeting when she realized the facility of it; the individual cards had all the player's relevant info, latest performance stats, even a bit of their history right on the back, made for easy visual reference and made sorting them into flight groups, even plotting out formations and flight patterns on the enormous table or nearby bulletin board, quick and easy.

"Key word being average," Spitfire pointed out. She flipped over the four cards in question and pointed at the bar graph. "See? Mid range, right across. Nothin' against these ponies, they push themselves hard... but they don't excel at anything, and that drags the whole team down."

"But isn't 'average' whash you want?" Scootaloo said. Rainbow Dash's number one assistant was sitting at her own table, going through her own (brand new) collection of cards and trying to chew an enormous mouthful of gum. She'd been the one to go on the store run for the cards, and one set for herself-- and all of the gum from both-- was her share of the loot. She was currently up to six sticks of gum at once and was clearly contemplating a seventh.

"Whaddya mean, squirt? And cut back to a wad smaller than your head, there."

"I mean--" Scootaloo paused to pull the gum out, stick half of it on the corner of her desk, and re-insert the remainder. "I mean, you're all team fliers. Right? Everypony has to fly together, in the same formation, at the same speed. If those guys are the middle, shouldn't everypony at either end be trying to match them?"

The two mares looked at each other. "It's an interesting perspective, anyway," Spitfire admitted, to which Rainbow Dash shrugged.

Rainbow Dash looked at Scootaloo. "Well that's the thing. If we have everypony just try to match the average guys, then the, like, whole average would go down... lower than the average guys." She held her hooves up side by side, like she was balancing a scale. "And then the new average would be lower... because... math... things..." she gave up.

"What she's trying to say is that we're trying to raise the bar for the whole group, not lower it," Spitfire chipped in.

"What she said."
"Meh, whatever." Scootaloo shrugged and went back to sorting her cards. She couldn't resist a final jab, though. "What's the point of being the best of the best, if you can't DO your best-- because you're holding back?"

Rainbow Dash brooded a bit. "She's kind of got a point though," she said. "I sometimes feel like the routine is... holding everypony back. Every pony here--" she waved her hooves over the table of cards-- "is the best of the best in at least one or two areas. But nopony really gets to shine... except for me, flying all alone out there. And that's starting to feel a little awkward. All the Wonderbolts ought to have a chance to excel."

"Yeah," Scootaloo said. "I mean, look at Starblaze here." She held up a card with a white-maned mare on it. "Her bio says she used to be an aerial gymnast before the Wonderbolts." She picked a couple of others. "Then there's Velvet Slipper... she was sky ballerina. It'd be cool to see that stuff in a Wonderbolts show..." She rested her chin in her hooves and stared off dreamily. "I've seen pictures of the ribbon routine the gymnasts do, and the Dance of the Breezie Princess is really awesome..." she looked up suddenly. "Or-- so-- I've heard," she said, faking casual badly.

Rainbow Dash cocked an eyebrow and grinned. "Gee, I didn't know you were into that frou-frou stuff, squirt," she teased.

Scootaloo huffed. "It's not all frou-frou!" she protested. "Not... all of it anyway. --And it takes a lot of skill and athletics to do that stuff!" she added matter-of-factly.

"I won't disagree with that," Spitfire said. "I've seen what those skydancers put themselves through." She looked intrigued, though. "So you're saying we should break up the act a little? Throw in some more solo routines?"

Rainbow Dash tapped the table with a hoof, thinking. "Yeah, I guess I am," she said. "Now that one of us has said it out loud... I like the idea."

"Give the show more variety--" Spitfire said.

"And let ponies see we're more than just a bunch of lock-step parade ponies," Rainbow Dash added. She looked through the cards. "Lessee, Starblaze and Velvet Slipper... we'll pull 'em aside, see if they can pull their old acts out of mothballs... and wasn't Soarin part of a barnstormer group back before he signed up?"

Spitfire nodded. "Will this help any with the primary mission, though?" she said almost as an aside.

Rainbow Dash ran a hoof through her mane and shrugged. "Whatever pulls in bigger crowds, I guess," she said. It was a fact that Dash secretly lamented, when she was honest with herself-- she was not a clever pony, at least not outside her personal limited talents. The best idea she had come up with yet for finding hidden alicorns or latents was the brute force approach, to hold big gatherings-- airshows, parades, ribbon cuttings--- and scan the crowds with Twilight's alicorn-o-meter spell.

There was a rap at the door. Before anypony could respond, it was cursorily pushed open. In strode an orange earth pony mare with a blonde mane, a clipboard, a strict no-nonsense suit and a sour look on her face. "Your Highness," she drawled without preamble. "I have, once again, more than a few things that you have allowed to pile up that I must bring to your attention."

Rainbow Dash gave her a noncommittal grunt and a less than enthused look. "Fine. Lay it on me, Harshwhinny."
The royal secretary consulted her clipboard. "First, you have several meetings scheduled loosely--" her lip curled at the word 'loosely'-- "For this afternoon. Naturally, they have all interpreted your invitation for 'about three-ish' to mean three o'clock precisely, and have of course all arrived simultaneously... I have done my best to have the staff to dance attendance on them, but they are all getting impatient to see you now." She rolled her eyes. "And of course, each wishes to see you first..."

"Uh, whups." Dash got to her feet. "You can take it from here, Spitfire?"

"Sure, I'll see what sort of program I can whip up," Spitfire said, giving Dash a salute.

"Great. C'mon squirt, duty calls."

"Coming!" Scootaloo finished stuffing her card collection in her panniers, slapped on her winged baseball cap and trotted after her hero.

"Come on, Harshwhinny," Dash said over her shoulder as they passed through the door. "Walk with me, talk with me. Get us a little exercise."

"Power-walking in a business suit. My cup runneth over," Harshwhinny said drily, but she trotted obediently after.

Scootaloo looked over her shoulder at the dour-faced assistant, who was flipping through her clipboard and muttering to herself. "Why'd you hire her to be your secretary?" she stage-whispered to Dash. "She's so--- grumpy and serious."

"That's kind of why," Dash whispered back. "Look, I know I'm not hoity toity enough to be a proper princess," she confessed. "And I'm really not good with formal... stuff. But I don't wanna let anypony down. So I hired somepony to be my secretary who would, y'know, ride herd on me."

Scootaloo curled the corner of her mouth a little and shrugged. "Okay, I... guess... but isn't her being an earth pony gonna, you know, make it hard to keep up sometimes?"

Dash snickered. "Uhh, I'm kinda counting on that. I'd lose my crackers if I couldn't get away from her when I really wanted." The two pegasi stifled their giggles as the officious earth pony caught up with them. "So, spell it out, who's waiting on us?"

Harshwhinny harrumphed. "Firstly, the Mayor of Windy City," she said. "to do a debriefing with you about your Highness's up and coming Wonderbolts performance."

"Why, is there a problem?" Dash said, frowning. "I thought they had everything squared away ahead of time."

"They did," Harshwhinny said. "Now they do not. It seems there are a few things that have... cropped up which make the scheduled show problematic." she flipped a few pages on her clipboard. "To start off with the first problem, it seems that the tourist season has just started and Windy City is experiencing a much bigger flock of vacationers than usual. in part due your 'royal command performance.'It seems that a new Princess visiting is a major draw for visitors, imagine that... The hotels, restaurants and business owners are all thrilled; the traffic controllers and law enforcement, not so much."

"And this is our problem how?" Dash said.

Harshwhinny looked annoyed. "Because while the hotels, restaurants and other venues are all booked up or overbooked, so is the Windy City stadium. It seems somepony got ambitious and sold
five times as many tickets as the venue has seats."

Dash groaned. "Well, we can just pull... a couple extra days of shows, right?...No?"

Because the secretary pony was shaking her head. "Which brings us to the next person knocking at
the door. There's a delegation from the farming communities in Lee Valley. They want to lobby a
complaint with you about the local Weather Bureau."

"the Weather Bureau? I'm not in charge of that!" Dash paused. "Uhh, am I?"

"You're the Princess," Scootaloo pointed out in a singsong.

"More exactly, you're the nearest Princess in reach," Harshwhinny said. "And the ponies of Lee
Valley are demanding their right to petition the Throne--" she pointed a hoof at Dash's collarbone--
"which is YOU, to settle their dispute with the local Weather Bureau."

"So what's their beef?" Dash said. "And what does it have to do with us--"

"The local weather bureau, which happens to be located in Windy City, has apparently
undersupplied Lee Valley with rain this year," Harshwhinny droned. She hoofed Rainbow Dash a
sheet of paper. "As you can see here, if they do not get their shortage filled soon, their crops will be
in serious trouble."

Dash took the weather sheet and looked it over. Her jaw dropped in dismay. "What?? How did it get
this bad? It'd take a three day rain just to get the water tables back up!"

"Apparently they 'postponed' the rain multiple times these past few months for, quote, 'important
state events," Harshwhinny said with a roll of her lip.

Dash groaned and facehooved. "So our little Pony Princess traveling show arrived just in time to
either be rained out, or extend their drought for another week. Great." She pulled her hoof down her
face. "That's gotta make us popular with the pony on the street..."

"The headlines on the Lee Valley newspapers are quite florid," Harshwhinny agreed. "In addition
the Police Commissioner wishes to discuss the need for added security, The Mayor wants to discuss
city funding and overhead--"

"In other words, to ask the Crown-- which is me-- to hoof the bill for all the extra work," Rainbow
Dash said sarcastically. "And why do we need extra security all of a sudden?"

"Probably," Harshwhinny said drily, "because the Crown Prince of Griffonstone is coming to Windy
City as well. He wishes to attend the air show-- and, I would suspect, take the measure of one of
Equestria's new Princesses."

"Wait wait what, crown prince?"

"Yes, Griffonstone recently crowned its first king in almost a century..."

"Wait, they had no king? For that long? What was going on?"

Harshwhinny glowered at her. "You never read those files I sent you on Equestria's diplomatic
neighbors, did you." It was a statement, not a question.

"...No. So spill."

Harshwhinny let out a sigh of disgust and continued. "Approximately a century ago, Griffonstone
was a small but thriving griffon nation on the border of Equestria. They've been in decline for almost a century, after the loss of the Statue of Arboreas, the symbol of the king's right to rule.

"About two years ago, however, a griffon named Alexandrius led an expedition and retrieved the statue from the bottom of the Abysmal Abyss. Upon his return he was crowned king of the Griffons, and has spent the last two or three years working on, quote, 'rebuilding the Griffon nation to its former glory.'" she smirked humorlessly. "Which in practice has basically consisted of knocking the skulls of the more stubborn clan leaders together. His son, Ajax, has been acting as his emissary and diplomat to Griffonstone's former allies, which includes Equestria, shoring up relationships and making new ties."

"And strutting his stuff with his troops, to show everypony his Daddy is nogriffon to mess with," Dash threw in.

"Quite. And, apparently, the Crown Prince got word of the ascension and wants to, as they put it, take your measure." She waved a hoof in the air. "So rather than heading for Canterlot to meet with Celestia, he and his entourage have taken a detour to Windy City with the intention of meeting with you." She took a long pause. "Which, in royal terms, means a public photo op, a private meeting, then a public social event of some sort, then a semi-formal black tie event..."

"Great," Dash grumbled. She looked at Scootaloo. "Hey, Squirt. You might wanna take your chance and bail for a while."

"Really?" Scootaloo said, stopping in the middle of the hallway.

"Yeah, it looks like the whole day is gonna be long boring meetings with windy, boring people," Dash chuckled. "You were sayin' you wanted to check out Windy City, see what kind of skating you could do? Now's your chance. Just be back by sunset."

"Are you sure?" Scootaloo said skeptically. She already had her scooter out. "What if you needed me to fetch something for you, or--"

Dash snorted. "Then I'll slap some roller skates on Harshwhinny and send her," she said sarcastically. "Go on, scat!" Harshwhinny pulled a face like she'd sucked on a lemon.

Scootaloo squealed with laughter. With a hummingbird buzz, the filly zoomed off down the hall and disappeared around a corner. Dash turned to Harshwhinny. "So, I'm guessing we'll meet with the mayor first...?"

*****

Windy City, like Ponyville, was a mixed-tribe community... But there the resemblance ended. Rather than the gently rolling hills of rural farmland, it was situated on Windy Peak, the one of the tallest and definitively the steepest mountain in Equestria. Buildings and towers and high stone walls climbed up the slopes in tiers like fancy decorations on a wedding cake. Zeppelin docks poked out into the open air, and windmills of every shape and size adorned the rooftops and towers, catching every wisp of the endless winds that circled the rocky crags. The pegasi neighborhoods clustered around, circling slowly with the winds. And above it all stood the Alicorn Academy.

Scootaloo could see it from the deck of the Thunderstreak. The last few hundred feet of the mountain poked up through the cloudline, right in the center of the Pegasus neighborhood like the spindle on a record player. There were actually two peaks: on the shorter, broader one stood city hall, surrounded by the mansions of the city leaders and nobility. They clustered together, reaching as high as they could with peaked roofs and towers, like they were struggling to reach up above the cloudline. On the taller, narrower peak, accessible only by a narrow arched bridge, stood the school, Alicorn
Academy, one of the premiere unicorn schools in Equestria. Its domes and pillars of gleaming ivory shone white under the sun. Even the highest and fanciest mansion had to look up to see it. That probably flies right up the hoity toity ponies' noses, Scootaloo thought, snickering to herself. She lugged her scooter up to the glider rack on the port bow.

"Ahoy, Scootaloo," one of the airship crew shouted. "And what are you up to on this fine day?"

"Just goin' out to check out this burg," she called back, strapping on her helmet and goggles. "I hear they got some radical skating turf out there."

The crewpony laughed. "Well, be sure and stay safe out there, lass."

"Why? That'd take all the fun out of it!" She gave him a cheesy grin; if you'd asked her she would have said she thought it was 'rakish.' He laughed again and waved her off. She gave him a salute, hopped her scooter up onto the rail, double checked the bolts, and dove off.

Scootaloo still couldn't fly.

Not for lack of heartfelt effort on everypony's part, either. A lot of the Wonderbolt's resentment with Rainbow Dash's little tagalong for tattling on them had dissolved when they had learned of her 'little problem...' and her adamantine refusal to give up had won her a place in their hearts. Nearly every Wonderbolt had taken at least a shot in helping the pint sized filly; folding her into their exercises, dropping little hints and tips, even a thorough going-over by the team doctors. But nothing had worked. She still had insane levels of wingpower: at one point she'd towed three of the Wonderbolts across the training-room floor on a trolley by wingpower alone. But for some inexplicable reason she just could not turn that thrust into lift.

Fortunately for Scootaloo's morale, someone on the staff with a little mechanical aptitude had a brainstorm... and had made a purchase at Cloudsdale at one of the few shops that catered to ground-bound ponies.

The junior-size glider was a marvel of engineering, really; it was woven of star spider silk and stretched over a spring-loaded mithril frame, and had some very finely tweaked size-changing enchantments. It could fold down to the size of an umbrella, and snap open with the press of a button. A bit of retrofitting, and the glider had bolted to the handlebars of her scooter like a snap. Now, with a single press of a button, Scootaloo's scooter effectively turned into Equestria's first pony-powered microplane.

Scootaloo fell about a dozen feet. Then the retractable wings snapped open like twin umbrellas and she caught the air. She zoomed off through the skyways of Windy City with a whoop, her wings buzzing.

Scootaloo thrilled as she soared, her mane and tail whipping in the wind. She was far less agile in the air than a regular pegasus, and nowhere near as fast as her idol. But one shaky maiden flight around the Thunderstreak in her new scooter-glider and every grudge she'd had against the Wonderbolts for dissing Dash was forgiven. Heck, they could have shaved Scootaloo bald and painted her pink, and she would have forgiven them for it.

Still...

She looked around at other pegasi flying the airways, in and out of their jobs and stores and homes on their own wings, and still ached... "No," she said out loud. "I'm not gonna think that way. I'll get my wings sooner or later... This right here is awesome enough for now." She pulled a defiant loop-the-loop.
"So what's cool to see...?" She looked around. The Cloud Quarter (why did they call it a quarter? It was more like a third of the city, really) was cool enough, but she didn't really feel like poking around here. She could cloudwalk of course, but her scooter couldn't exactly roll well on cloud streets... and she didn't feel like folding it up, carrying it around, unfolding it again to fly someplace else over and over again.

She looked down through the layered clouds. Not far below she could see a flock of colorful gliders and chutes launching off the mountainside and riding the thermals. Earth pony and unicorn tourists, probably. Should she drop down and join in? Then again, she was using her wings to propel herself; wouldn't the other gliders and parasailers see that as "cheating?"

"Oh brother, what is this?"

The voice came from overhead. She looked up in surprise. A couple of teenage colts, a yellow one and a dark brown, were flying just a few feet over her head. "Oh wow, this is just sad," one sneered. "A pegasus who needs a glider to fly?"

"Yeah, they'll let anypony up here nowadays," the other one said. "Nice helmet, kid. Mommy pick it out to go with your little flying tricycle?"

"Bet she has a pair of water wings at home for when she takes a bath!"

The two cackled. Scootaloo felt her insides shrink. The safety helmet suddenly felt like it had grown to the size of a watermelon. "Really?" she blustered. "Really, we're gonna do this?"

The two bullies swooped in, crowding her. "G'wan, get outta here, spaz, you're blockin' traffic!" The brown one kicked down at her left wing, making her wobble and veer.

"Hey! Where were the Guard, doggone it? Why wasn't anypony else interfering?"

"You heard him, get outta here!" The other one aimed a lazy kick at her head, knocking her helmet askew. She wobbled dangerously through the air as she struggled to straighten her headgear. She managed to push the helmet straight and pushed her smeared goggles up. The wind whipped at her teared-up eyes. For the first time she noticed that the other few ponies she was flying past were staring-- not at the bullies, but at her. More than one had their faces screwed up like they'd smelled something bad.

A couple of the rougher looking ones were jeering along with the bullies.

"G'wan! Get outta here! This neighborhood's for REAL pegasi-- not earth ponies with toy wings!"

Scootaloo did the only thing she could do. She started bawling. "Luh-lea-leave me a-l-lone!" she sobbed, howling as if her heart would break. Incredibly, the two teenage hecklers only laughed louder.

"I ju-just want-ed to fuh-fly..." she sobbed, wiping at her eyes with her foreleg. Her wings stopped buzzing and clamped to her sides. She reached forward, grabbed the pull-cord, and yanked. The wings on her glider snapped shut. Silently, she tumbled from the sky like a stone, disappearing into the clouds below.

A gasp went up from the onlookers. Ponies ran to the edge of clouds and looked down. The two hoodlums hovered in midair, stunned. "holy crow..." the blonde one breathed.

"She-- omigosh, she offed herself!" The brown colt said. "Pigeon into the Pavement!"
The two dropped down onto a drift of cloud and looked over the edge. They peered down as far as they could see, trying to see some sign of their victim.

They never even saw it coming. Scootaloo's glider came rocketing up through the cloud behind them, the outstretched wingtips catching both of them across their rear ends with a resounding crack. They leapt into the air so violently their rumps nearly overshot their shoulders.

"WHAOAOW!"

"WHAAAAH!"

"LATER, SUCKERS!" Scootaloo jeered. She pulled an immelmann and rocketed away. The onlookers broke up laughing as the two hoodlums, their rumps smarting and their egos stinging, righted themselves and glared after the fleeing filly.

"Let's get her!" The brown one snarled. The two launched themselves off the cloud and raced after her.

Scootaloo dove down, pulling a lazy barrel roll towards the city below. Towers, buttresses and windmill vanes reached up to meet her. Whoa, that mountainside was coming up faster than she expected-- She juked left, threading the needle between two freestanding towers, and began racing downhill. The prevailing winds around Windy Peak revolved down around the mountain, and the buildings and streets more or less followed, circling down the mountain in a corkscrew. Scootaloo took advantage of that, dropping down till she was whizzing between the rooftops at heartstopping speeds.

Her hecklers were far behind her, but buck, they were closing fast; she could feel the turbulence they were stirring in the roots of her wings, even at this distance. Scootaloo guessed by their attitudes they usually flew circles around out-of-town ponies. Probably thought of themselves as real skyjockeys-- the losers.

But there was no denying they had the home court advantage. They probably knew every rooftop and skyway in Windy City like their own cutie marks, while she-- she skimed under a walkway so close her glider's wingtip scraped on the underside-- while she was flying almost totally blind. She couldn't outrun them, she couldn't outmaneuver them... so she'd have to outsmart them.

She reached out, trying to get a feel of the wind-- not just the prevailing currents overhead, but all the little whorls and eddys that gusted between the buildings whipping by...

Bingo. Just what she needed, right ahead. She slowed down, letting her pursuers close the gap. Just as they were close enough to yank hairs out of her tail she gunned it. She dove down between two rooftops into an alleyway bare inches wider than her glider's wingtips.

"Hah! You're not gonna lose us like THAT," one of her pursuers jeered. They were right.

Of course she wasn't trying to lose them...

She could see the end coming up. The alleyway ended at a flat wall with an open dumpster, branching off to the left and right into passageways too narrow for her glider to pass. She pulled back till she was almost standing on her tail, stalling out maybe three hoofsteps from the wall-- she caught a brief glimpse of a colt standing next to the open dumpster with a bag of trash, eyes and mouth wide and frozen in shock as she stalled out inches from his nose--

Then the winds she'd sensed had kicked in. The alley behind her and the two narrower ones to the left and right were situated so that they caught the wind in regular cycles, funneling them down to
this intersection and forming into a huge updraft.

The one nice thing about big wide glider wings? They caught updrafts way better than pegasus wings did. The swirling winds swept under them and she shot straight up like she was in an elevator. Her bullies weren't so lucky; they whizzed by just below her feet and slammed face-first into the open dumpster.

It was a minute or two of darkness, filth, and groans of pain before they uncroggled themselves enough to push the dumpster lid back open and figure out what happened. Scootaloo was perched on her scooter on the ledge above them, holding her helmet in one hoof and regarding it idly. "Ya know, you're right," she said. "This helmet is pretty retarded. I mean, we're pegasii. We're BUILT for crashing. Do you see any grownups wearing these things while they fly around? And what good would it do to wear one anyway if you smacked into the ground from a thousand feet up? Maybe give 'em something to scoop your brains up in? Meh. I'm ditchin' it."

She slam-dunked the helmet into the dumpster. There was a loud klonk and a howl. "Think I'll keep the goggles, though. They're cool." She bike-hopped down off the ledge, landing on the dumpster lid and slamming it shut on their heads. She found a stick, shoved it through the latch and hopped her scooter off, leaving them to bang on the inside of the lid and holler.

She bent over and started strapping down her scooter's glider wings, then realized she had an audience. The colt with the trash bag was still standing there, laughing so hard he couldn't make a sound. She looked him over: he was a unicorn, about her age, with a white coat and a dark blue stripe through his mane and tail, and a cutie mark of a flute playing a single note. He wore scruffy looking saddlebags and was leaning helplessly against the trashbag he'd been dragging.

"Uhh, hey." She gave him an awkward wave. She looked at the bag. "Oh. whups. Guess you can't put that in there with them in there. Or you could, but it might go badly for you..." She looked back. "Don't worry about them, by the way. If they just keep their heads and jiggle the lid the stick will work its way out." There was a moment's silence from the dumpster; then the lid began jiggling with obvious intent.

The colt did something that puzzled her. He pulled a can of spray paint out of his pannier, trotted over to the dumpster and sprayed something on the side. It looked sort of like... Scootaloo tilted her head and squinted--- like a crown, or maybe a jester's hat, circled and with a slash drawn across it. What was that all about?

He tossed the can back in his pannier and trotted back to her, motioning urgently. There was shouting at the mouth of the alley, along with the clatter of hooves and what sounded like the jingle of armor. "They went this way," somepony said.

To her surprise the colt tugged at her shoulder. He looked alarmed for some reason."What is it?" She asked. Instead of answering he looked her in the eye and nodded his head in the direction of the side-alley. Puzzled, she followed. He ducked around a corner and into a recessed doorway and pulled her in after, making shushing motions. A moment later a pair of disgruntled-looking city watchponies flew overhead, idly glancing over the alleyway. There was clanging from the dumpster; the watchponies obviously heard and flew off round the corner to investigate. The moment they were out of sight, the colt made motions indicating they should flee. Thinking quickly, Scootaloo pulled him up onto her scooter behind her and pushed off with her hoof, sending them rolling silently down the gentle slope of the alley.

Once they were a block or two away, the colt let out his breath in a puff of relief and dismounted. He signaled her that all was clear. She followed him as he trotted off down the crooked little alleyway, lazily pushing her scooter along. "What was all that about?" she asked him, after they'd gotten a
block or two away.

Instead of answering, he pointed at her scooter, tapped the folded up wings, then pointed at the sky and made circling motions while shaking his head. "What? I don't... wings, flying, circles in the air---look, just TELL me, okay?" Scootaloo finally said.

The colt puffed out his cheeks in annoyance. Rolling his eyes, he lifted his chin and tapped his throat.

"You... can't talk?" Scootaloo said. The colt nodded. "...Oh." The single word held a world of empathy; her wings twitched unconsciously.

"I guess we can hold off on explanations till we find somepony who understands hoof-signs, or whatever. Anyway, Thanks. I'm guessing that I was about to get in trouble with the Guard for some reason..." She shrugged and rolled her eyes. "S'not like me and my friends haven't gotten into trouble before. Though usually there's more crashes and explosions first." He gave her a peculiar look.

She thought it over. "Why is your cutie mark a flute?"

He grinned at her and lit his horn up. A single glowing mote rose from his horn tip and played a trio of notes, for all the world like a pan pipe. "Oh, wow, neat!" Scootaloo said, applauding. He blushed a bit. "Heh. I've heard of ponies who could play horns, but not like that." He stuck his tongue out at her, but grinned anyway. "My name's Scootaloo."

He nodded, then thought for a moment. Carefully, he scratched out five letters on the ground with his hooftip.

F L U T E

"Oh. Flute?" He nodded. "Pleased ta meetcha." She held out a hoof and he shook it. He grinned and Scootaloo giggled. "Soo... I sorta came down here hoping to find some radical scootering terrain. You wouldn't know any-- what, you too?" Even as she'd spoken, Flute had pulled out a folding two-wheeler and snapped it open. He hopped on board it and rode in a quick circle around her. "Hah! Cool! You mind if I hang out with you?"

He smiled, whistled between his teeth and made a 'come along' motion with his hoof. His horn lit up and he rolled off down the street.

"Awesome!" Scootaloo revved up her wings and took off after him. "I guess we're gonna meet your crew? You do have a crew you hang with, right?--- awesome. I wanna see what kind of riders you got around here..."

***

As it turned out, Rainbow Dash's "meeting" with the Mayor and the Commissioner had turned into more of a "Walk and talk" with the two city officials. Time had pressed, and Dash had been needed over at the stadium. Mayor Fussbudget, a short, pudgy pegasus with a thinning mane, toothbrush mustache and a tendency to sweat (eww) had kept up an unending litany of frets, worries, and lamentations the entire way there. Even now he was trotting alongside her, fussing over the apparently unsolvable snafu the airshow was causing poor little him. Dash was sure that she was going to kick him in the face soon if he didn't shut up.

"---and the Windy City Business Association is throwing conniption over cart and chariot parking space," he was saying. "Parking space! Is the city supposed to spin extra parking out of thin air--"
"...that's exactly what you DO," Rainbow Dash finally snapped, annoyed. "You can make sky-chariot lots out of any unsuspecting patch of cloud. That's what the Crystal Empire did for the Equestria games, for crying out loud."

"Not every chariot is a--"

"And let the residents rent out their homes as parking space," Dash said over top of him. A trifle loudly. "It's what ponies do anyway. Your city is tiered up a mountainside--- most of the residents could rent out their rooftops as parking space for the street above them."

"B-but city ordinances---"

"Just issue temporary permits for it if there's some sort of ordinance against it!" Dash rolled her eyes. "Jeez! How did you get elected-- by telling everypony everything you COULDN'T do?"

"Ahem."

At Harshwhinny's cleared throat, Dash bit down her temper and started over. "Look, you got my promise the Crown will do what it can to smooth this mess out," she said. "But you gotta meet us halfway, here. C'mon, I mean, parking? Let's stick to the big problems first."

The mayor harrumphed. "You're right, parking is the least of it." They had reached the royal box of the Cloudiseum. Pegasi were flying back and forth, setting up cloud obstacles for the Wonderbolt's training session. He waved a wing over the rail. "Our cloudiseum is first rate, but if those ticket oversales are anything to go by, it isn't going to be nearly large enough..."

"Second verse, same as the first," Dash said. "Just grab some spare cloud and make some extra seating."

The mayor shook his head. "We're already near the size limit," he said. "Any larger and the stadium will start spontaneously precipitating."

"Spontaneously...?" Harshwinny interjected in puzzlement.

"It'll start raining," Dash translated. She gave the stadium a one-over. "And he's right," she said disgruntled. "Too much more cloud structure on top this one, and the mountainside ponies are gonna get an unscheduled bath." The fleeting thought crossed her mind to wonder how it was going to be possible for all those earth ponies and unicorns to make use of a coliseum made of clouds, but she dismissed it for later.

The Commissioner chose that moment to speak up. He was a lanky orange pegasus stallion with a brown mane and a sour, world-weary expression permanently stamped on his face, and his voice was deep and lined with gravel. "We've got more pressing concerns than stadium seating," he said. "We seriously need to up security measures for the City during your visit, Highness. The current state of affairs is just asking for trouble."

"More ponies, more problems?" Dash hazarded a guess.

He snorted. "If it was only that," he lamented. "Your little floor show is stirring up a hornet's nest."

"Why? Have you had problems like this with other Wonderbolts shows?" Dash asked. She looked over at Harshwhinny, who raised an eyebrow and shrugged.

Commissioner Gold Star shot her a disbelieving look. "Surely you can't be unaware...?" his eyebrows arched higher at Dash's uncomprehending look. "Princess Rainbow--"
"Dash."

"--Princess Dash, you can't have missed that not every pony is particularly happy at your and your friends' coronation," he said.

Dash shot him a look of her own. "Yyyeah, Spitfire dropped the hint that it flew up some ponies' tailfeathers," she said.

"To put it LIGHTLY," he said witheringly. "There have been agitators, protest groups popping up... everything from two-bit nobles trying to kick up sand with Celestia about it to common folk who are worried or angry about yet another bunch of royalty being put over top of them. There's even a political movement, the crownbreakers, who advocate abolishing the crown entirely."

"What? Really?" Dash exclaimed, wings flaring in shock. "And Celestia let 'em get away with it?"

"Free speech," Gold Star said, with a toss of his head. "It's their right to campaign for whatever political hoo-hah they like, no matter how dippy. So they go around passing out pamphlets and holding rallies attended by hundreds of empty chairs where they talk about how much better Equestria would be without Celestia running it."

Dash snorted. And there's irony for you, she thought. Celestia would agree with them.

Gold Star misunderstood her snort of laughter. "Yeah, precisely. Just a bunch of old armchair anarchists, blowing wind so old it has mummy dust in it.... which is probably why most ponies haven't even heard of them. But recent events have revitalized their movement. Luna's return got 'em all stirred up. Then your own coronations... they're getting a lot more sympathetic ears these days."

He glowered. "Some of 'em have been talking about doing more than holding rallies and handing out fliers..."

"We've got our own gangs of hoodlums, no-accounts and troublemakers running around" He went on. "There's one particular group, I've been keeping my eye on them for years. They're normally just pranksters..."

"Pranksters? They're violent hoodlums!" Mayor Fussbudget spat. "Vandals and-- and-- "

Gold Star actually broke out a sour smirk. "You're just still mad about what they did at your reelection party," he said.

"They swopped out all the ice sculptures with ones shaped like pigs!"

"Piggy banks, actually," Gold Star corrected, his smirk spreading into a grin. "Ones with your face on them. Seems they objected to you passing those ordinances against skating on public property. Or maybe they were getting back at your political supporters for their, ah, 'donations' they gave to persuade you to pass them, hmm?" He ignored the mayor's venomous glare. He wrinkled his nose almost nostalgically. "Wouldn't have been so bad if they hadn't frozen fart bombs inside 'em that went off as they melted..."

The Princess of Loyalty hooted. "How'd they pull that off??"

"Probably the same way they got into the my watchpony's guardhouse and superglued roller skates to all their hooves that one time," he said in a more rueful tone. "Or the time they filled all the city fountains with bubble bath. Or when they used rainbow juice to dye the walls of the Academy pink... or that one time they got five hundred ponies, out of absolutely nowhere, to come together at high noon at City Hall and do the 'Sunshine Sunshine' dance..."
Rainbow Dash cackled in appreciation as Fussbudget and Harshwhinny's faces puckered up in disapproval. "I think I'd like these guys!" she said.

"Yeah, well, they're a headache to me and my men," Gold Star said. Not the least of which because our prissy mayor throws a fit at me every time they pull a prank, he added silently. "But lately their... public displays have been getting sharper, more political. Some of us are worried that the Crownbreaker movement has started infiltrating them, maybe even taking them over."

Rainbow Dash seriousnessed up a bit at that. A pack of gifted pranksters teamed up with a bunch of ponies with an unsavory political agenda-- that could get ugly, fast. "So who are these guys, anyway?"

Before Gold Star could respond, there was an enormous "WHUMP" from out in the middle of the field. Startled, everypony looked up. A large unformed cloud moving across the middle of the stadium had apparently... exploded. Or imploded. Or perhaps even turned itself inside out. Gobbets of cloud were boiling and tumbling over each other. As they watched, they slowly formed into blobby, but perfectly readable letters:

THE MAYOR IS A POOZER

Mayor Fussbudget made a sound like a bludgeoned baby seal. Dash barely choked back a laugh.

"There's somepony up top!" Harshwhinny said. Sure enough, atop the block of billowy letters was a pony. They were wearing a baggy grey sweatshirt with the hood pulled up. What could be seen of them was ink black. The hooded figure slowly flared his right wing. It was obviously a signal: the sound system for the stadium suddenly crackled to life and began thumping out a wild rock song. The stallion-- Rainbow Dash was fairly confident it was a stallion; something about the way he moved-- began to dance.

"Commissioner, do something!" Fussbudget sputtered.

"Security!" Gold Star didn't shout, but his voice carried. "Arrest that stallion! And get up to the sound booth and try to catch his accomplice!" uniformed ponies scattered around the stadium jumped to obey. A half dozen pegasi flew in to tackle the trespasser off his cloud, three swooping in from each side. It didn't go well for them. The music hit a power chord; he snapped his wing left and a spray of what looked to Dash guessed was powdered rainbow juice shot out, trailing a stream of colour, and caught three of the hapless guards in the face. Another power chord, a snap of his wing to the right and three more guards were eating rainbow dust.

He wasn't done. Third power chord, he sprayed rainbow dust off his wing in an arc over his head, making a corona that showered down on the cloud under his hooves--

My name is Mach
Thanks a lot
I know you love the thing I've got
You've never seen the likes of me
Why, I'm the biggest thing since Tribe War Three--

And just as a fresh batch of pegasi surrounded him, he leaped.

Dash squawked, wings flared in alarm. "What does he think he's ohMYGOSH HE'S ONLY GOT ONE WING!!!
She was right. The hoodie the pony was wearing had sleeves for the forelegs, and slots down the side for wings. One slot, however, flapped empty in the breeze. He was alone, surrounded by dozens of pegasi, and was plummeting through the air with only one wing-- and he proceeded to make monkeys out of every pony in the stadium.

Rainbow Dash had never even heard the word "Parkour" before that day, but she was about to get a visual demo in it. She watched, slack jawed, as this vandal pony moved in ways she'd never even heard of. He kong-vaulted over the back of the first guard to come at him, springboarded off the chest of the second, caught the edge of one of the stunt rings floating loose around the stadium and went from an underbar to a heart-freezing, impossibly long catleap to the stadium wall. The next instant he had scuttled up it like a spider and was running along the edge of the rail like he'd been born there.

Nopony could corner him. He dove over, under, and around anypony that got close, ran up vertical walls like they were flat ground only to spin around and leap off them past the heads of ponies pursuing him. He only had one wing but that didn't slow him down in the least; he used it to lengthen his leaps, bring himself up short, change his direction in midair... he was impossible to predict as a bumblebee whacked out on poison joke pollen.

What was even more insane was that he wasn't even trying to escape. Several times he could have been out the door and gone-- instead he ran around the inside of the cloudiseum, goading his pursuers on. He even stopped to pull off a few more dance grooves to the music pounding over the loudspeakers whenever they fell too far behind.

Dash was mesmerized. "Whoa...." she whispered.

Someone sounded the hoofball buzzer over the loudspeakers. A second hoodie-wearing pony, this one with banana yellow hooves and wings and wearing a backpack, came diving out of the control booth and bolted hell-for-leather, ponies of his own in pursuit. That must have been the signal because the one-winged stallion suddenly stopped playing around. He began bounding up the tiers of the cloudiseum, straight for the royal box.

Two of the ever-present guardponies-- second-string Wonderbolts, armed and armored for the job--stepped forward, halberds at the ready. "Watch out, your Highness! HALT, INTERLOPER!" one shouted. They crossed their halberds in front of Rainbow Dash with a clash, barring the way. The black-winged pony didn't even slow down. He used the crossed blades as a springboard, jumping up and doing a winged backflip over them, and directly over Rainbow Dash's head.

Everything slowed to a crawl. He crossed overhead, the hem of his hood almost brushing her horn. She got a brief glimpse of stunning blue-grey eyes as a single rose struck her in the collarbone.

"Enchante," he said.

Then he was landing on all fours right behind them, and backflipping out the doors before anypony could move. The commissioner barked in outrage and the two guards scrambled in pursuit.... too late, he was already gone. Moments later he and his partner in crime could be seen winging away, the yellow one locked arm-in-arm with him, compensating for his missing wing. They disappeared quickly in the afternoon sky-clutter of the Pegasus Quarter. Commissioner Gold Star returned shortly from his thwarted pursuit, disgruntlement all over his face.

"It was them, wasn't it? Wasn't it?" Mayor Fussbudget shrielled.

Gold Star screwed up his mouth. "Yes, it was them," he said with the patience of the weary. "As if there were any doubt." He pointed at the vandalized construction cloud; spray painted on the side--
presumably in still more rainbow juice-- was a crude symbol; it looked something like a jester's hat, circled and a slash drawn across it. "The Nobody's Fools strike again."

"NoBODY?" Harshwhinny said.

Gold Star grunted. "Instead of no-pony. It's more inclusive, or something." He looked at Dash. "I hope you can see what we're talking about, Highness. They may not be wild-eyed revolutionaries, but these clowns can cause a lot of disruption if not outright havoc if we don't deal with them. Can we trust the Crown to provide what assistance it can in upping our security?"

"What? Oh, yeah. Yeah, definitely." Dash said, distracted. She had a good reason to be. Like all the others, she kept the alicorn-sensing spell on a low, passive buzz all the time now... just in case. It wasn't perfect and none of them new for sure how well it would work on nascents, rather than full-blown alicorns. But... just as that crazy-awesome stunt stallion had flipped by over her head, she had felt a most definite TWINGE...

"And Harshwhinny? Pass on the word; tracking down that stallion is top priority. I want him in Royal custody A.S.A.P."

"Your Highness?"

"Just do it. Top. Priority." Harshwhinny squinted and cocked an eyebrow, but she nodded and trotted off. Dash stood there for a minute, staring out at the cloudiseum and all the workers, guards and wonderbolts running about like agitated ants, and brushing the petals of the rose back and forth under her chin. Was she sure--? Yes, definitely. For one reason or another she absolutely wanted to see this one-winged stallion again.

Why did this goofy grin keep wanting to creep its way across her face?
It didn't take long for Scootaloo to figure out the downside of living in Windy City: wherever it was Flute was taking her, a surprising amount of the trip there was uphill.

Fortunately the second most popular form of transportation in Windy City seemed to be the cable car. There was an entire network of lifts ascending and descending the mountain, ranging from single-seater lifts one might see at a ski resort to trolley cars for a few dozen ponies at a go, all of them powered by windmills and winches that slowly but tirelessly raised and lowered the cars up and down the mountain's slopes. She and Flute hopped aboard one of the larger ones and, for the price of a bit, soon were ascending their way up Windy City.

It wasn't until they were back up above the cloudline that Scootaloo realized they were making their way up Scholar's Peak, the half of the bifurcated mountaintop upon which sat the Alicorn Academy. “You live up near the Academy?”

Flute waved his hoof and whistled through his teeth in a way that Scootaloo had already learned to interpret as “wait and see.”

The last trolley dropped them off well up above the cloudline, in a clutter of shops and service roads at the foot of the Academy. “Huh,” Scootaloo said. “This is the back way in, huh? Guess it makes sense--- you couldn't get everything the school needed across that long skinny footbridge every day.” Flute nodded.

He led her up one of the crooked, narrow sidewalks and down an alley behind a storehouse. They were at the foot of the Academy wall, surrounded by a clutter of empty shipping crates and pallets. Flute walked up to a pallet leaning against the wall and rapped out “shave and a haircut.” Scootaloo jumped in surprise as the pallet swung away from the wall on hinges, revealing a crude doorway behind it chopped out of the stone blocks. A charcoal-grey pegasus colt with a smear of purple across his nose stuck his head out of the opening and glared at them. “Who goes there?? Give the password!”

Flute scrunched up his nose in annoyance and rapped out “shave and a haircut” again-- this time on the colt's forehead. “Ow, ow! Okay, it was just a joke, Flute,” the door-colt said, rubbing his forehead. “Sheesh. Oh, hey ,waitaminute, who's this ??” he pointed an accusing hoof at Scootaloo. “Members only, Flute, you know the rules--”

Flute went “psshhh,” rolled his eyes and pushed the belligerent colt back and out of the way.

“Aww, c'mon--” the colt protested... but he yielded. “Fine,” he said. “But don't say I didn't warn ya.” He retreated back into the shadows.

Flute motioned over his shoulder for Scootaloo to follow. “Are you sure?” Scootaloo said, cocking an eyebrow. Flute nodded, rolling his eyes and making a dismissive toss of his head after the would-be gatekeeper. “Oookay, but I better not get any propwash from anybody about coming in,” Scootaloo said, stepping over the threshold.

Scootaloo hesitated. For once in her life she had second thoughts; she was in a strange city, following ponies she had just met someplace she didn't know... then she felt her compact thump against her breastbone. She'd hung it around her neck on a chain for safekeeping. If things started looking hairy, she could call for help at any time-- and Rainbow Dash would be there in a flash.
Confidence rebolstered, she stepped inside.

The hidden door banged shut behind her. She took a second for her eyes to adjust to the indoor lighting, and looked around. “Cool,” she said.

She found herself standing on a rickety-looking wooden platform overlooking an enormous two-story furnace room... at least she judged it to be a furnace room, going by the wood-burning furnace dominating the center. There was an enormous stack of wood next to it at the bottom of a long chute from the ceiling. A staircase wound down one wall from a heavy steel door, from Maker knews what vast building the furnace vented its heat into overhead.

The spacious room was bare stone walls, floor, and ceiling, and was loosely divided up into spaces by blanket-tents, makeshift curtains and barricades made from old shipping crates and pallets. Throw rugs dotted the floor here and there, breaking up the space further. A ramshackle-looking walkway divided the space into two open stories. The furniture was mostly early to middle soapbox and egg crate, with touches here and there of shipping pallet. There were a few colts ranging from her age to teenage, running around doing various things. One of them caught sight of Flute and skidded to a halt. “Hey, Flute!” he shouted. “How’s it going?”

In answer, Flute popped off a sound-bubble. This one played a fanfare.

“Good day? Make a lotta bits hauling trash?” The next sound-bubble rang like a cash register. The other colts laughed. The colts meandered in their direction.

“I'm Scootaloo,” she said, waving a hoof and trying to look cool. “'Sup.”

Before she could get out any more than that, a short, burgundy-on-red colt with a cutie mark of an exploding firecracker who was barely any larger than Pipsqueak back home got up in her face. “Hey. Hold up here!” said. “What are you doin' here?”

“Hey, I was invited!” Scootaloo protested, looking down at him. Her wings fluffed up in an intimidation display. “You got a problem with that, pal?”

“Yeah, I do,” the runty colt said pugnaciously. “This is OUR hideout!”

The paint splattered pony from the doorway was over by the wall, steadfastly ignoring the group as he spritzed the wall with a spray can. The firecracker colt glared at him then turned his attention back to Scootaloo and Flute.”Doggone it, Flute, you know the rules-- nopony gets to see the secret hideout unless the whole gang says they're cool!”

Flute made a harrumphing noise in his throat and rapped his hoof on the floor three times. “Oh, fine, if they got three of us to vouch for them. Hardly matters seeing as she ain't even got THAT...”

“Hey, if Flute says she's cool, she's got my vote,” said a voice behind them. Scootaloo turned to look; standing in the doorway were a pair of teenage pegasus colts. One was bright banana yellow with a messy blonde mane and a cutie mark of a banana peel and a fizzing round mortar bomb. He gave everypony a goofy grin and leaned against the doorframe, fiddling with his panniers.

The firecracker colt gave him a disgusted look. “You would, Foster,” he said, irritated.

“So would I, Crackerjack,” said the second colt. Everypony's attention snapped to him. He stepped out of the shadows of the entranceway; a jet-black pegasus colt-- pegasus, if Scootaloo was to judge by the wing-shaped bulges under his baggy hoodie-- and a cutie mark of a bird of some type streaking forward across his hip like it was going a hundred miles an hour. He moved and spoke
with a cool suaveness that made prickles run up Scootaloo's pinfeathers. “Like Bananas said, if she's
cool enough for Flute she's cool enough for me.” He sidled into the room, giving the colts the eye as
he walked past them. “Anypony got a problem with that?” he said, his voice smooth as ice.

Most of them shrugged indifferently and went back to whatever they had been doing. Crackerjack
tried to protest. “Come on, this is supposed to be a SECRET HIDEOUT,” he complained. “We go
letting every blank-flank filly with a couple a scooter tricks know about it--!”

Scootaloo bristled at the slur, but the black colt let out a scornful laugh. “Secret hideout? Are you
kidding, Crackerjack? The reason we got this place is because the Custodian for the University lets
us stay down here in exchange for tossing a few logs in the furnace every now and then. Half the
maintenance staff knows we're down here. And back off-- you weren't a blank flank all that long ago
yourself.”

Crackerjack folded. He let out a snort and rolled his eyes to the ceiling. “Fine, whatever,” he said,
turning about and marching away. “Next thing ya know we'll be inviting the Mayor in for a visit,”
Scootaloo heard him grumble.

Scootaloo heard the two colts chuckle. “Don't mind Crackerjack,” the black colt said to her. “His
cutie mark just came in and it's making him excitable.” Scootaloo gave him a puzzled look, but he
just smiled and looked to Flute. “So how'd you meet this one, Flute? It better be cool, I stuck my
neck out there for you.”

Scootaloo shrugged. “Eh, I just scraped a couple of Poozers from the Pegasus Quarter off into a
dumpster,” she said.

“What?”

Scootaloo gave them a quick retelling of her run-in with the two toughs, and how she met Flute.
Bananas hooted with laughter. “Oh man, I knew this filly was gonna be a hoot!” He said, giggling
like a loon.

The black colt gave her a half-grin. “Heh. Guess you are okay, kid. I guess as leader of this dump I
should introduce you to everyone. Flute you know already...” the mute unicorn played a three-note
chord. “Heh. Right. And this here is Bananas Foster.”

“Of the Chiquita Archipelago Bananas,” the yellow pegasus said, putting on the fakest snooty accent
Scootaloo ever heard and holding out a hoof. “Chaaaaawwwwmed.”

Scootaloo's giggle turned into a snicker when he offered her his hoof. “Yyyyeah. Maybe after you
put away that joy buzzer you slipped on that hoof,” she said.

“Ooh, she's onto you already,” the black colt said. “Tough break, comedy king.” He tossed Foster
his backpack. “Go stash the gear, wouldja?”

“Fine, whatever,” Foster said cheerfully, snagging the bag out of the air and tossing it over his back.
“Later, taters.” he trotted off, weaving through the clutter.

The black colt started strolling. Scootaloo and Flute strapped their scooters across their backs and
trotted along beside him. “Foster's folks are a bunch of rich hoity toities-- they own a bunch of
banana plantations on some island someplace,” the black colt said. “but Foster is an okay guy. He
plots out all our best stunts. Kind of addicted to pranks, so watch out for it.” Scootaloo giggled at his
remark. She knew what it was like living around a would-be prankster king. “He wants to get into
comedy, but his parents really don't approve. They sent him to Alicorn Academy to learn to be a
proper upper crust cake-eater. They'd probably blow a gasket if they knew he spends all his time with us instead.”

“I thought it was a school for unicorns,” Scootaloo said.

The colt's muzzle wrinkled in distaste. “Yeah, used to be. But money's money, I guess... didn't take 'em too many years of low tuition to start touting that 'like the Princess, we are all three tribes' thing and opening up non-magical classes for rich swots from the other two tribes.” His tone was a bit sour.

“Anyway, moving on-- that over there is Cookie Spritzer--- Spritz for short.” He pointed to the paint-splattered grey pegasus who was, well, spritzing something on the wall. “His mom's a baker-- he scores us cookies from time to time--- but him, he's our resident artist. As you can see.”

“What do you-- oh,” Scootaloo said as her focus readjusted. For the first time she realized that the walls and even the ceiling were covered in pictures--- drawings, symbols, even stylized words sprayed on in vivid rainbow-bright colors. He was currently finishing up the tail of an enormous sea serpent that coiled across the ceiling. “Whoa, cool.”

“Yeah, he's okay with pens, pencils, brushes, but give him a spray can, and he's the next Bold Lion.”

She squinted. “Is that rainbow juice?” she asked.

“Yeah. We made him switch from spray paint after the time he passed out, caught fire and exploded.”

“Passed out, caught fire and exploded??”

“We promised never to talk about that,” came Spritz' voice from the ceiling.

“I promised nothing,” Bananas Foster called back gleefully from somewhere else in the room. “You shoulda seen it, filly-- Dum dum here starts painting a mural down in a room off of a maintenance tunnel somewhere--”

Spritz stopped painting with his spritzer bottle and glared down. “Foster--”

“But he didn't have any ventilation, so the paint fumes got to him-- He staggers out of the room he was in and passes out onto his safety lantern, guess it wasn't so safe after all, because his tail caught fire--” snickers started up all over the basement.

“Foster--”

“And he wakes up and starts running in circles screaming, flapping like a mad chicken, me and Zonk trying to catch him and put him out--”

“Foster!”

“And he runs right back into the room full of paint fumes. Wha-BOOM! Shot his smokey butt halfway down the tunnel--”

“FOSTER!!!”

“--Wouldn't go out for weeks because he was afraid the gryphons would mistake him for a fried chicken—”
“AARGH!” Spritz dove from the ceiling. The sounds of kicking and punching wafted over.

“Aaand that was Spritz,” the black colt said, deadpan. “Speaking of Zonk—” he gave a brohoof to a colt who was busy fixing a loose wheel on a skateboard. “Sup.”

“Nuthin much, just another day, another new wheel,” the colt said.

Scootaloo looked him over in surprise. He was a light brown with a dark crew-cut mane... and black and white stripes on his legs. “what sort of pony are you?” she blurted out.

The colt flicked one of his overlong ears and gave her a pained grin. “I ain't a pony at all,” he said. “I'm a zonkey.”

“A what?” Scootaloo giggled.

“Zonkey. Daddy's a zebra, Momma's a donkey,” Zonk said with the air of someone who'd explained this WAY too many times.

“He's from the farming community down in Lee Valley. Donkeys and a few Zebra immigrants, mostly. He's got a Zebrabwayan name so fancy it's got legs,” her tour guide explained, “So we just call him Zonk.”

“Zonk the Zonkey?” Scootaloo couldn't help it, she giggled even louder.

“It's better than my given name,” Zonk admitted. He recited a serious of liquid-sounding syllables. “My momma gave it to me when I was born, got it out of a book of zebra baby names. She thought it sounded exotic, and wrote it on the birth certificate before Dad could stop her.”

“What's it mean?” Scootaloo asked.

Zonk rolled his eyes. “Copyright 988, All Rights Reserved. '...Oh laugh it up,” he snorted as Scootaloo rolled on the floor laughing. “Em-One? The new foal is pickin’ on meee,” he faux-whined at the black colt, giving him big teary eyes and making his lower lip wibble.

‘Em One’ gave Zonk a laugh and a playful shove. “Ehh get back to work, 'Reserved',” he teased. Zonk waved him off and went back to fiddling with his skateboard wheel. “His 'thing' is languages, in case you were wondering,” the black colt said in an aside to Scootaloo “He speaks zebrabwean, donkey, Neighpon, Neightalian – even a little gryphon. Largely in self-defense... everyone he delivers to keeps expecting a zonkey to know a little Zebrabwean--- he's never been near the zebra lands in his LIFE.”

“Delivers to?”

“Yeah, he makes his hay doing deliveries for ethnic restaurants around here.”

They stopped in front of a chopped out hole in the outer wall. A sheet of plywood with the words “Danger: Wizard's Lab” and “Warning: Keep Out” sprayed on it in bright red paint served as a crude barricade. Through the gaps around it came strange lights and sounds and even stranger smells. The black colt rapped on the panel. “Hey Presto...” he sing-songed.

“What is it,” someone sing-songed back, their voice muffled by the door.

“We got company. Come on out and say hi.”

“Okay, just one second...”
“Uh oh. I don’t like the sound of that...” Scootaloo was quickly dragged to one side of the door. A moment later there was a colossal BANG. The plywood door jumped five feet out of its frame, then fell over with a crash. A purple cloud billowed out, and a periwinkle colt dressed in a heavily patched wizard’s robe and a hat trimmed in bells staggered out. “Well, the results of that experiment were rather questionable,” he coughed, spitting up puffs of purple smoke. He pulled off his hat and waved it about, trying to clear the smoke.

Scootaloo blinked. An earth pony in wizard's robes? “Uhh, why is he dressed like Starswirl the Bearded?” she asked.

Presto brightened at her comment. “Ah, you know Starswirl?”

“I... know somepony who knows a lot about him,” Scootaloo amended.

“Scootaloo, say hello to Presto the Magnificent, our resident wizard,” her guide said, with a sweeping wave of his hoof. Presto gave a mock bow.

Scootaloo couldn't quite keep herself from staring at the general vicinity of the colt's forehead. “Ummm....”

“I know, I know,” Presto huffed. “Earth pony. No horn. I get it.” He slapped his hat on with a defiant jingle. “There's more to magic than just having a horn you know... it's all interconnected. There's potions, and zebra brews, and earth pony rituals, and pegasus---”

“Yeah yeah yeah, I know! 'All three tribes have their own magic,' “ she said. “It's just when ponies say 'magic' they usually mean... well...”

“I know,” he sighed suddenly. “They think only unicorns can do unicorn magic. But sooner or later I'll figure out a work-around, just you wait and see...!” He looked up suddenly at her guide. “So,” he said eagerly, his tone suddenly conspiratorial. “Did the cloud-writing powder work?”

“Yup,” the black colt said with a grin.

“And did you stay the full three minutes?”

“Three and a half, I timed him,” shouted Bananas Foster from somewhere in the room.

“Hah! I made money. Spritz owes me two bits.” There was a sound like a teakettle whistle from inside the lab. “Oh dear,” Presto said. He dove back into the lab.

“Aaand that's our cue to move on,” the black colt said quickly. “Hup two, hup two...” they both skedaddled just before sparks began showering out of the doorway.

The room was divided up by all sorts of means. More than one crude blanket-curtain dotted the two stories of the furnace room. They passed through a divider curtain of ratty bedsheets on a clothes line; on the other side was a chubby, caramel-colored unicorn colt with a teddy bear cutie mark. He was sitting in the middle of a pile of plushies and dolls, and was studiously sewing a dress on a miniature bear. Keeping him company was a scruffy looking brown earth pony colt with a dog-paw cutie mark. The scruffy pony was alternating between scratching himself with his hind hoof, worrying a stoutly-made plush piggy in his jaws, and just sitting there panting, staring cheerfully at nothing at all. “This is Soft Touch and Bowser,” the black colt said. “What up, fellas. New kid in the clubhouse, say hey.”

Soft Touch looked up. He blushed at the sight of a girl in his curtained sanctuary. He mumbled something incoherent and ducked down, focusing on his sewing. Bowser on the other hand came
bounding up and dropped the piggy plushie at the black colt's hooves. He bounced up and down eagerly. “C'mon, throw it!”

“Bowser, I--”

“Throw it! Throw it throw it throw it!”

“Fine, fine.” The raggedy piggy was scooped up and tossed across the basement. Bowser tore off after it like Tirek himself were on his heels. “You'll have to excuse Bowser. He was raised by Diamond Dogs. Yeah, yeah, I know-- but it's true. They had adoption papers and everything.”

Scootaloo stared. “Ohhhhkayyy...” she looked over at Soft Touch. “So. Um. What're all the dolls for?”

Soft Touch blushed even redder and shrank down as if he expected to be mocked, but he spoke. “Some of them are mine,” he confessed. “But most of them are for the foals at the hospital,” he said softly. “And, um, the orphanage.” He paused.

“And you made them all?” Scootaloo asked. “Well, gee, that's awful nice!”

Soft Touch nodded and actually dimpled at the compliment. “Wuh, would you like one?” he said. He fished around and held up a panda bear in a frilly pink dress.

Scootaloo was instantly torn; without even knowing it Soft Touch had hit her in her one weakness: panda bears. She mentally chewed her lip for a second-- Panda bear! But frilly pink dress. Frilly pink dress-- but Panda Bear!-- before caving. “Thank you!” she all but squealed. She took the bear in her hooves and gave it a quick, almost involuntary cuddle. Then she heard her guide let out a quiet snicker and quickly gained control of herself. “I'll... keep her in here for safekeeping,” she mumbled redfaced as she hastily stuffed the bear in her saddlebag. She deliberately ignored the black colt giving Soft Touch a wink and a brohoof.

“Heh. You got a way with the ladies, S.T.,” he said. Soft Touch only turned even redder. “Later, Touch. Gotta finish the tour.” He trotted out through the curtains with Scootaloo... just in time for Bowser to come rushing in, stuffed piggy in his mouth, and bowl Soft Touch over, tail over teakettle.

“Why's somepony like Soft Touch hanging out with you guys?” Scootaloo said. “He seems more like...”

“More like the kind of kid guys like us would be picking on?” Scootaloo said. “He seems more like...”

“More like the kind of kid guys like us would be picking on?” the black colt said knowingly.

Scootaloo flushed and shrugged. “Well... a lotta you seem like jock ponies,” she admitted.

“So jocks gotta be jerks? Besides, not everypony in our gang is a skater hooligan,” was the answer. “I mean, take Wheezer over there.” He pointed to a skinny pine-green colt in enormous glasses avidly reading his way through a stack of comic books as tall as himself. “Little guy's got asthma and more allergies than he's got letters in his name. But he's one of us. And what about Presto? He strike you as a hardcore athlete?” He let out a short rueful laugh. "We got more than one misfit here.

“Come to think of it, run down the list. Foster's a cake-eater's son who'd be disowned for hanging with us. Flute's a mute, Zonk gets treated like a sideshow freak just because he has stripes on his legs, Spritz is an awesome artist but everypony in the fancy art schools says what he does isn't art...

“Presto-- he wants to study unicorn magic. He's got more magic smarts than any three unicorns I know, but nopony in the Academy will take him seriously. And both his parents are unicorns, which only makes it worse. Soft Touch is a sweetheart who wouldn't hurt a fly and who makes plushies for
little foals in the hospital... you can imagine how the other kids out there treat him. Bowser... you know, the first time I ran into him somepony had tied a string of cans to his tail?

"Even Crackerjack there--" he pointed at the colt in question, who was off in one corner punching away at a sandbag. “His talent is fighting. He wants to be a boxer or a wrestler or even one of those mixed martial arts fighters-- but no gym will take him because they say he's too puny.

“Nah, we don't hang together because we're all radical shredders...Though some of us are,” he added, brushing his mane back and looking suave. Scootaloo giggled. “We hang together because, out there, we're all a little bit misfit in one way or another. But in here, we're family and we look out for each other.

“Yeah, some of us might tease or crack jokes at Wheezer or Flute or Soft Touch... but as long as they're with us, nopony else will.” He looked a little bit fierce about that.

“Buck Yeah,” came the response from somewhere in the room.

“I think I like you guys,” Scootaloo said, pleased. She looked the leader of the herd over. “So what makes you a 'misfit' then, uhhh...?” she paused.

He looked openly surprised at her. Then his expression shifted to one of sly amusement. “I think I'll let you figure that one out yourself,” He said. “And oh yeah, never told you my name, did I.

“My name is Mach One.”

____

(1)That's where we get the round cartoon bomb from-- old-school mortars, designed to be fired as cannonballs. True story.
(2)You remember him. Legendary painter, sculptor, inventor, and draconequus trapper.
“Doggone it,” Rainbow Dash snapped. “How hard can it be to track down this guy? I mean, how many one winged stallions do you have in this city?!” She sucked on the straw of her soda, trying to soothe her irritation in sugar, caffeine and lemon-lime.

It had been a couple of days and the pony hunt had proven annoyingly unsuccessful. On top of all the other troubles and glitches the coming demo was having, the Princess of Loyalty was finding it irritating. She was at the Commissioner's office now, finding out more things to irritate her.

“Last count,” Commissioner Gold Star said drolly, “about two hundred.”

Rainbow Dash gawped. “Wha--?”

“That's not counting all the ones too young, too old, or who are missing the wrong wing,” he added. “Then the numbers go up. By another hundred or so.”

Rainbow Dash scowled. “Okay, explain.”

Gold Star looked amused. “Princess, due to Windy Peak's, er, dual-layered construction, Windy City is a very popular resettlement community for grounded pegasi,” he said. “We have a population here close to a million, with a sizable percentage of those being pegasi who have suffered debilitating accidents, illnesses, or birth defects that prevent them from flying. That in turn attracted businesses such as pegasus rehab clinics, which in turn attracted more transient and temporary residents with flight troubles…”

“(..Wow,“ Dash said sincerely. “I... never thought about that.” She had been planning on taking Scootaloo to one of the better rehab clinics, to see if they could tell them anything new-- she set the thought aside rallied. “Still, a jet black stallion between their teens and twenties with a missing left wing--”

“That's assuming he was actually black, actually was missing a wing, and was actually even male,” Gold Star countered. “The pranksters and protesters running around this city tend to wear disguises, and roll in powdered rainbow juice or use color-changing spells or potions to hide their real colors and their cutie marks. And it's been a fad among the extreme sports types lately to do their stunts with one wing literally tied behind their backs…”

Dash rubbed her temples with her wingtips as she paced the length of the office. “Great,” she grumbled. “All we know for sure is he's male…”

“And how would you--” Dash gave Gold Star a wide eyed 'you dam well know how' look. “Uhh, don't answer that, Highness.”

“Anyway,” she coughed. “Definitely a stallion. I heard his voice. Heck, I was close enough to see the color of his eyes.”

“What color?” Gold Star said, picking up a pencil. “And could you recognize his face again?”

“He had a scarf or something wrapped around his mouth,” Dash said reminiscing. “But I looked right into his eyes... they were this icy blue-grey... and there wasn't a speck of fear in them. He had half the ponies in the building after him and he was vaulting through a room full of armed guards over the head of a Princess and he was as cool as a cucumber sandwich.” Nopony present failed to notice that her eyes got a faraway look and an odd grin slowly grin across her face. She had kept the magically preserved rose with her all this time; she had it out and was running the petals thoughtfully
under her chin. She noticed Gold Star staring at her with a raised eyebrow. “What?” she demanded.

Gold Star carefully said nothing.

“Look, crud, just tell your deputies to keep their eyes peeled for this guy,” Dash said, her face NOT growing hot, no, it wasn't.... “ And give my head of security that list of one-winged ponies; she'll figure out something to make the search easier. He's... he's more important than I can tell you.” The detection spell, thrumming to life when he was inches away...

Gold Star mulled over that suspiciously, then dismissed it. Meh, Princesses and their hangups. “Well we've got other issues to deal with besides a bunch of anonymous pranksters,” he said. “The Crownbreakers have been out agitating; my men had to ride herd on three different protests. Small, maybe a couple dozen ponies and others-- but each one's been a little bigger and a little rowdier than the last.”

She stood and looked out the office window down (and there was a lot of 'down' around here) at the city. “And what are they saying?”

“What you might predict,” he shrugged. “Mostly yelling and waving signs. Down with the Aristocracy, No More Fake Princesses--” Dash bristled a bit at that--- “Celestia Equals Sombra, Zebras out of Griffonstone, Meat is Murder...”

“Wait, what, back up?” Dash said, turning away from the window to stare at him, eyebrow cocked.

Gold Star's eyebrows were as level as a table. “You'd be amazed, Highness, at how many ponies see a protest-- ANY protest-- as an excuse to stand in the street blocking traffic, waving signs and yelling their favorite random stupid things at total strangers. There's all sorts in this lot, from aristocratic traditionalists to ponies who want to abolish Parliament and make Equestria a collectivist commune to those who want to return to the 'traditional' separatist rule of Three Tribes to those who think Celestia and Luna are lizard people in disguise. Every flavor of crazy, but they all have 'down with the princesses' as a common slogan.”

Spitfire, who was leaning in the corner, keeping a casual but alert watch, spoke up. “Are they dangerous?”

Gold Star shook his head. “Mostly harmless,” he said. “But whoever's bankrolling them... I'm no so sure. I've seen way too many mass-produced fliers and banners lately. Most of these ninnies are more the poster board and magic-marker crowd. And these “spontaneous” protests have been too coordinated.”

Dash scowled to herself. “Is this happening in other places in Equestria?”

“A good question,” Spitfire said.

“Not as I've heard,” Gold Star said, “and that makes me more suspicious. Why here, why now?”

Dash's scowl deepened. “That's easy,” she muttered. She was having a rare moment of insight. “It's because they think I'm the weakest.”

“The weakest?” Gold Star said.

“Of the new Princesses,” she said. “Politically, I mean. Twilight was personally groomed by Celestia since she was a foal. Rarity, she's got this in the bag; she's more fancy shmancy class in one fake eyelash than most ponies have in their whole bodies, and she's got a whole network of upper-crust ponies she knows from Fancy Pants on down. Applejack is already the blue-collar pony's princess,
and Pinkie Pie has Luna herself watching her back. And Fluttershy, she's famous from being a fashion model, almost as classy as Rarity, and so pretty and sweet that everypony loves her anyway.

“Me? I'm not any of that. I'm a scruffy jock, and everybody thinks jocks are jerks; I haven't got any huge family or fancy pedigree or hookups with the rich and powerful; I don't know diddly about politics and as far as class goes? Last night at dinner I nearly stabbed myself in the eye with my salad fork. If you wanted to make a big political mess, you could start at worse places than with me.”

“Which brings us,” drawled Harshwhinny as she strolled in, holding her clipboard in one hoof, “To Prince Ajax of Griffonstone. Despite everything you did make what I perceived as a fairly good impression on him.” She paused. “Even after the fork in the eye thing.” Dash stifled a groan. “Contrary to every bit of common sense, he seems to approve of your... rough cut personality.” The mare's expression indicated just how preposterous she found that concept. “My sources say he is quite looking forward to the Wonderbolts performance, and a chance to see, quote, 'Equestria's Warrior Princess' in action.”

“Warrior Princess?” Dash said in disbelief.

“Well, of the three tribes we pegasi have the most militant history,” Gold Star pointed out. “Plus you personally have mixed it up with a lot of monsters and villains over the years, if my sources are correct, so that would give you something of a reputation.....” The world-weary law enforcer actually looked intrigued. “Is it true about the changeling invasion...?”

“Oh that, yup.”

“The sonic rainboom, of course---”

“Definitely.”

“...Kicked a dragon in the face??”

“Eeyup. Not one of my better moments, but yeah,” she added under her breath. “So he's heard of all that, huh? Here's hoping that the Wonderbolts show impresses him as much.”

“As to the show, I've been talking to the local weather board. We've got good news and bad news,” Gold Star said. He leaned back in his office chair and gave Dash a wry grin. “The bad news is that it's going to require a change of venue. They have a demo in their main building...”

“Finally, some progress,” Dash said, ruffling her wings. “Let's get a move on, I wanna see this!”

“Cool,” Rainbow Dash said, leaning over the table. Tiny cumulus clouds scattered before her prodding hoof, falling apart and swirling back together. “I've heard of these things before but the Ponyville branch of the Weather Bureau never had the budget for it.”

“We're, ah, fortunate that way,” the pegasus pony manning the table said, tugging on the collar of his lab coat. “Windy City certainly has the revenue base for the newer weather management tools, not to mention the incentive.”

They were gathered around what in weather pony parlance was known as a smoke table. No smoke
was actually involved of course, but rather a thick, magically treated fog. The table itself was a
detailed relief map, actually more of a miniature model, of Windy Peak and the surrounding valleys
and mountains. Small puffs of fog-- miniature clouds-- floated across the board, driven by tiny vents
simulating the wind. The weather ponies fortunate to have one of these expensive magical devices
could use them to run simulations for every kind of weather. The tiny clouds could even precipitate.

Right now everypony's attention was on the model of the Pegasus quarter and the cloudiseum slowly
revolving around the peak of Windy City. A lime green pegasus technician in labcoat and safety
helmet was standing over the table, fiddling with the settings.

“So you're proposing using a Thunderstorm as a temporary arena??” Dash said. She grinned and
gave the cake-sized cloudy mass a poke. Teeny lightning bolts sparkled. “Okay, that's as hardcore as
anything I could imagine, but there are some obvious problems...”

“A proto-thunderstorm, actually,” the weather technician said, scratching his mane under his hard
hat. “See, the problem with creating a temporary cloudiseum of sufficient size for the predicted
audience was that anything we built was going to be so large it would break down and turn into a
thunderstorm anyway. But a couple of the cloud engineers had the brainstorm, aha, of not fighting it,
but working WITH it. See,” he poked at the center of the miniature cloud, “the center is hollowed
out. It's actually a huge storm ring, which will slow and diminish the updrafts to controlled levels.”

Now Dash was in her element. She peered closely at the model. “Oh, I get it... Dispersing the mass
in a wide toroid will let the natural updrafts and downdrafts continue, but at a slower rate.... a
thunderstorm in slow motion,” she said. “nice.'

“The entire storm itself will be most of a mile high, and a mile across. Most of that will be raining...
but it will be topped with thousand feet of cool stable upper cloud, perfect for seating, and an open
amphitheatre area for aerial performances nearly a mile wide.

“But anything below the first thousand feet will still be too compressed, it will be continually
precipitating.... over Lee Valley... which solves the rainfall schedule problem! Sweet!” Dash cackled,
giving the technician a jarring backslap.

“Of course,” the technician wheezed, adjusting his jarred helmet, “the rainfall will be both heavy and
quite steady, lasting for at least three days. The winds will be minimal, but there will be on the
balance a lot of cloud-to-cloud lightning in the lower portions...” he used a pointer to prod at the
miniature storm, indicating the dozens of tiny cloud-flashes sparkling on its underbelly.

Dash hopped up on a chair and looked down through the center of the coliseum, looking at the tiny
lightning flashes below. “Which will look totally awesome,” she breathed.

Spitfire jumped up on the other side of the table and peered down inside as well. “Oh yeah,” she
chuckled. “Our ponies ripping up the sky, a hundred thousand ponies looking on, thunder and
lightning flashing up a well of clouds from a thousand feet below... “

The princess and the wonderbolt locked eyes. “Totally. Awesome,” they said simultaneously. Their
matching grins would have made better stallions than the ones present nervous. “Are your weather
facilities up to this?” Dash demanded of the weather technician.

“Oh, easily,” he said. “Windy City is part of the civil defense initiative. We could whip up a chain of
thunderstorms this size.”(1) He shrugged. “Or a few thousand emergency cloud-shelters, or several
billion cubic feet of building-grade cloud from C grade all the way up to triple A... we're a bit over-
ingineered, really.”
“Then this is a go,” Dash said enthusiastically. “Spitfire, tell the others, let ‘em know we’ll be performing in a WAY bigger venue. Harshwhinny, tell our publicists to crank out fliers, newspaper ads, the works, to let everypony know about the venue change. No, the venue upgrade. Big bold headlines....”

She stood on her hind legs on her chair, spreading her forehooves wide as she pictured the title. “The all-new Wonderbolts show, this week-- only at THE THUNNNNDERDOOOOME !”

“...Tickets transferrable,” Harshwhinny added in an underspoken monotone.

“Heh. The squirt's gonna love this,” Spitfire said.

“Whoa, thanks for the reminder,” Dash said. She jumped down off her chair and whipped out her compact. “Gimme a minute...”

There are some readers who might wonder or even be alarmed at the apparently casual, if not to say careless, approach Rainbow Dash took to keeping track of her temporary ward. The reader would be advised to remember that Rainbow Dash was raised a pegasus, and was surrounded by a staff composed almost entirely of pegas, and traditionally, the pegasus approach to raising their offspring could be most generously called 'free range.' Earth ponies might be focused on keeping the colts and fillies close to the herd, and unicorn child rearing could be regarded as fairly fussy, bordering on helicopter parenting, but for pegas, spending most of their time airborne, hurtling through the sky at breakneck speeds, and living in houses made of magically clumped mist thousands of feet above the cold hard ground tended to inure parents to the comparatively minor perils of childhood.

As it was, Dash was getting a bit of ribbing about even her fairly hooves-off approach to watching after Scootaloo. When the average parent's approach to their child getting hit by lightning is “Well now! Hurt, din't it? That'll learn ya to keep kickin' clouds like that,” checking up on one's charge every few hours via a magic mirror hanging around her neck seemed positively smothering.

“Scootaloo. Hey squirt, you there?”

Across town (and slightly lower in altitude) Scootaloo felt her compact buzz against her collarbone. “Whups, scuse me guys,” she said. “Be right back?” She trotted to the nearest store on the street.

“What's up?” Crackerjack called after her. “We're about to get started!”

Scootaloo quickly opted for the quick-draw solution Rarity had taught her and the other girls for dealing with Annoying Questions from Colts. “Filly stuff,” she shouted over her shoulder as she ran inside. “You know--”

Various sounds of TMI echoed back. She snickered as she fled indoors to the store washroom. Rarity had been right on the money about that trick, apparently. She locked the bathroom door and opened her compact. “Hey, what's up?”

“Hi squirt,” Rainbow Dash's voice piped up from the mirror. “Just doing the hourly checkup on ya. Everything good?”

“Yeah, Dash,” Scootaloo said. “Me ’n the other kids were about to do a downhill scooter race. I gotta get back quick or they're gonna start whining. Anything else real quick?”

“I've got fun,” Dash laughed. “And... be safe, y'know? Those Crown Breakers are out there tryin' to raise a ruckus.”
“Losers,” Scootaloo snorted. A bunch of wannabe rebels trying to overthrow the Princesses? Dash would whup their butts in ten seconds flat.

“You seen any sign of ’em?”

“Not really, just posters and stuff... and I’ve been keeping an eye out for that one-winged stallion, too. There were a lot of them at that one rest home, but none o’ those guys coulda taken on a bunch of watchponies and guards.” The Nobody’s Fools often rolled past the Windy City Retirement Home when the ponies there were out. They were a nice bunch of ponies, and seemed to like the colts.

It was sad, really; ponies did what they could, but the reality was that a lot of ponies' special talents were tied pretty closely to which of the three tribes they belonged. If a unicorn lost their horn, or an earth pony went lame, it was really really bad. Sometimes there were work-arounds, or they could find some way to re-direct their talents. But if a pegasus couldn't fly anymore-- well, whatever career they’d had their entire lives, even their life in a cloud community, was pretty much over. There were a lot of pegasi in the retirement home, and a lot of them weren’t much older than her dad...

Now Scootaloo wasn’t dumb. It had occurred to her that Mach One might be the one-winged Stallion... but she completely dismissed the idea for two reasons. One, they were looking for a one-winged STALLION, and Mach was cool, but he was only a teenager, and a pretty lanky one. There was no way he could’ve whupped up on scores of guards like the pony Dash was looking for. Besides, he was one of the Nobody's Fools, and all the grownups were talking all the time about these Crown Breaker guys. So the mental connection was never made....

“Okay, I gotta go, Dash,” she said. “See you at sunset.” She snapped the compact closed and ran out of the restroom.

A moment later she burst out onto the street and grabbed her scooter from where it was leaning against a lamppost. “Okay, so let's do this,” she said. “So what's the course and what's the time trial?”

“Whoa, somepony's gung-ho,” Mach chuckled, trotting up next to her. “Okay, see this nice wide road we're on?” He pointed down the road to where it curved hard to the right and out of sight. “This here is Kessel Road, the main drag of Windy City... at least down on the ground.” He tossed his head up, indicating the Pegasus Quarter high overhead dismissively.

“It runs from the base of the skybridge to the Academy--” He pointed behind them to where the legendary walkway started its path up through the clouds, “—all the way down the Southern slope of the mountain, zig-zagging back and forth across the entire face. Used to be the only way up to the peaks, till they got the cable cars and the lifts laid in... it had trains of earthpony wagons plodding up and down the mountain all day. Now it's a a gentrified boulevard, with little shops and fancy villas and inns and little push-cart vendors at the corners...” his grin widened. “...And the longest, sweetest street-surfer run in the city.” The other colts cheered and whistled in agreement.

“So some of us here are trying to beat our best times doing the Kessel run,” Mach said. “Best time is twelve minutes, by yours truly.” He polished a hoof on his chest smugly.

“Okay, course breakdown: There are six right turns, six left turns, all hairpin, with straight runs in between. Fourth straightaway is a steep downhill, second and third are almost level-- you might even need to push a little to keep from losing speed on the third. The main drag is clear, and its usually pretty empty but keep an eye out for carts and pedestrians, especially past the sixth turn. Wheezer, Spritz, Presto, and Softy are on lookout, but don't take anything for granted. Be on the lookout for brass and badges.”
Scootaloo nodded and grunted. In the few days she'd been running around with the Fools, the importance of the lookouts had been impressed on her quite thoroughly. It seemed city hall was waging something of a dirty-pool war on the Fools and all the other skate brats in the city. The Mayor had weaseled through countless penny-ante ordinances that made it illegal to scooter, skate, board, or parkour in half the city, and legally risky in most of the other half. A number of the surlier city watchponies were in on it as well, constantly harassing the Fools and hitting them up on sight with citations for any petty infraction they could fabricate. It was unjust and unfair, but what could you do? Nothing but lay low, stick to the out-of-way corners, and put up lookouts to blow the whistle if they saw anypony in brass armor heading their way.

Scootaloo did feel a twinge of guilt about bending the law like that, but she reasoned that so long as they didn't actually run afoul of any watchpony or guard, no harm no foul, right?

“Wings and magic are fair game, but no flying. Oh, and remember-- any and all shortcuts are legit,” Mach finished with a knowing grin. “If you can take 'em.” He tugged the straps on his battered rollerblades and crouched down at the chalk-scribbled mark on the street that served as the starting line. “Try and keep up, newbie,” he said to Scootaloo.

“Keep up??” Scootaloo said. She glared at him with an evil smirk and pulled her goggles down over her eyes. “ohohoh, you're gonna regret those words...” She crouched down over her handlebars and her wings started to buzz.

“On your marks...” Mach said. A half-dozen scooters, skateboards and sets of roller skates, some shiny new, some home made from soapbox boards and shopping cart wheels, edged up to the line.

“Get set...” Scootaloo felt the wind eddies in the roots of her feathers as she tensed up. She could almost feel Flute on one side of her on his two-wheeler folding scooter, Bananas Foster on the other side in his old-fashioned “quad” skates, both crowding close.

“GoOOOHHH HOLY BUCKING HAY!!”

BZZZZZZZZZZAAAAAAAaawwwwww......

They'd been expecting the New Girl to put in a good showing. They had not expected her to all but explode off the starting line like a skyrocket. By the time the others recovered from the surprise and the blast of her tailwind, she was halfway down the first leg of the hill and accelerating. It took a few seconds for some of them to right themselves. “Holy Cats, look at that filly GO!” Crackerjack yelled.

“So what's everypony all waiting for, go go go--!” Mach all but dove down the hill after the vanishing filly, his gang right behind him, whooping and striking sparks off the pavement.

Scootaloo whooped in glee over the buzz-saw roar of her wings. Now this was the stuff! This first leg started with that awesome steep hill; between that and her wing-power she was already ripping down the road. As she passed the first bend she adjusted her goggles and looked back. She didn't even have to turn her head; this was a pair of gen-u-wine Wonderbolts goggles, with their little-known special feature: the goggles had tiny angled mirrors inside-- built-in rear-view mirrors so you could see straight behind, and to a lesser degree above or below you at any time. She could see the pack behind her clear as day; She was already halfway to the first turn but they were catching up fast. Flute and Firecracker's horns were glowing and fizzing like road flares as they accelerated after her. Bowser was doing pretty good on his soapbox scooter, his earth pony muscles propelling him forward with every kick of a back hoof, his tongue hanging out and trailing in the breeze.

Of the older colts, Zonk was pretty well in the lead on his worn but beloved skateboard. Scootaloo
snickered as she remembered Bananas Foster's joke about how it was probably the zonkey's stripes made him go faster... as for Foster himself, he was sort of flailing along in the back of the pack on his old fashioned four-square street skates, that ridiculous wide tie he always wore flapping behind him like a banner. And Mach One...

Scootaloo let out a gasp as he came zooming round the corner. He was MOVING, peeling around the hairpin turn, lying almost sideways as he leaned into the turn on his rollerblades. He weaved in and out among the others, using his one wing like a rudder, slicing the air, moving among the rest of the pack like they were standing still.

Scootaloo hastily snapped her attention forward, and gunned it. She reached the second hairpin and took it at full speed, skidding around the flower shop at the corner in a Neighpon drift. For a moment the street behind her was clear... then the others reappeared in the most surprising way imaginable-- around, over, between and even THROUGH the corner shoppe and its neighbor, vaulting over trash cans in the alley, hopping to the low roof on the uphill side and taking daring roll-drops off the downhill one, even shooting in through the back door and rocketing out the front to shrieks of alarm and shouts of agitation from those inside. Mach had to do a flip over a display rack full of flower pots, then his wheels were hitting the street not a yard behind Scootaloo. The Fools were all around her, whistling and whooping.

So that's what he meant by “all shortcuts are fair game-- if you can take them,” she thought.

She looked up ahead and grinned. The first straggling bits of traffic were showing up; carts and wagons dotted the street ahead, ambling slowly uphill, downhill, and across as if they had all the time in the world. The Kessel boulevard was now a moving obstacle course. A pony would have to be crazy to slalom that....

Almost are crazy as me, she thought. She grinned and revved for the first wagon. It was a buckboard piled high with clay pots, the pony pulling it moving across her path at a slow amble. She could almost have ducked and ridden underneath it....

Almost.

Instead she took a deep breath, folded her handlebars down and leapt off her scooter. She sailed over the loaded wagon, clearing the stacked pots by mere inches, her scooter rolling through underneath. By the time the cargo pony had yelped in alarm her hooves had already thwacked down on the deck of her scooter and she was on her way. The cargo pony shouted again as the Nobody's Fools swarmed under, over and around him-- and then left him far behind, still standing there with his forehooves over his head.... not a single pot so much as chipped.

Scootaloo laughed out loud. These guys really WERE crazy!

Scootaloo still led the pack by a length. She swerved around a hansom cab, threaded the needle between two push carts hawking their wares, vaulted over a pair of ponies inexplicably carrying a ladder across the middle the street... there was the next hairpin turn; she took it at speed, skimming along the inside of the turn--

Just as she took it she heard the lookout's whistle. Two long, two short... what was that? Oh right, road blocked ahead. The moment she cleared the corner she found herself bearing down on a solid wall of carts, road barricades and ponies. She caught a glimpse of Spritz up on a rooftop, waving a rag to try and flag them down.

She had no choice but to throw herself into a lowside, falling sideways and sliding across the pavement. Her saddlebag took the worst of it, saving her from a nasty case of road rash, but she still
slid a dozen feet, her head barely missing a nasty rap against the axle of a parked push-cart before she came to a wedged halt underneath it. "oof." she grunted. Not the most dignified landing she'd ever pulled off...

She was already squeezing back out from underneath and dusting herself off when Soft Touch came galloping up, the handle of his first aid kit in his mouth and frantic worry in his wide eyes. “A yoo okay?” he said. He spat out the handle and frantically looked Scootaloo over. “Oh, oh, you skinned your hip, hold still—” He popped open the first aid box and dug through it.

“Ahh, it's just a little road rash-- eyouch!” Scootaloo protested. Softy was already dabbing iodine on the shallow scrapes. “Hey, back off...”

“Might as well just bite the bullet, Newbie,” Mach chuckled as he skidded to a halt. “He won't quit till your boo-boos are all bandaged.” The others came rolling up behind him. “Ouch, rough way to get a Cutie mark.”

She looked back. He was right; the worst of the rash was right over the spot on her left hip where her Cutie Mark would be. And it felt like she had splinters in her right, from banging against the underside of the cart. “It's not really that--” she involuntarily sighed in relief as soothing ointment was daubed on the road burn. In a twinkling her flank was covered in clean white bandages. He was already around the other side with tweezers, pulling the chipped wood out of her skin, dabbing iodine and ointment, and slapping a stick-on bandaid in place. “Okay, thanks. Huh.” She wiggled her hip. "Wow, you're good at that.”

“I get lots of practice with these guys,” Softy said sheepishly.

“Yeah,” Foster chortled. “Remember Fire Ant Hill, Firecracker?”

“I remember Fire Ant Hill,” Firecracker said dolefully. “Landed wrong and took a skid-and-roll for like twenty feet.” He smirked. “But not half as well as Bowser remembers that endo he did last month.”

Bowser grimaced and gave a puppy-like whimper. “Passed under a construction sawhorse. Didn't get low enough,” Bowser confessed. Firecracker laughed as Bowser cringed. “Caught it on the kisser and did a backflip down the street.”

Scootaloo ouched. “I can almost feel it,” she said.

"Yeah. I remember the day I came out of a back alley and the road crews had just torn up the asphalt on Fifth and Vine... yeeexxeee,” Foster gave a dramatic shudder. “S why Soft Touch loads up on odds and ends and leftovers at the hospital. Between all of us, we've probably left enough skin behind on the pavement for Softy to build a whole 'nother pony.”

“So what IS all this, anyway?” Mach said, waving the crowd blocking the way. There were hundreds of ponies, and more than a handful of pushcarts-- like the one Scootaloo had almost T-boned-- parked around it or weaving through it, taking the opportunity to hawk their wares. The mob had completely ignored the minor road debacle, in favor of... whatever was happening just out of sight down the street.

Spritz came gliding down from his lookout point. “Couple of watchponies heading this way,” he said. “We better move.” He was right; several ponies with sour looks on their faces and the badges, breastplates and brass pot helmets of the city watch were working their way over in their general direction. Probably attracted by the loud berating of the owner of the push cart with which Scootaloo had collided. The Nobody's Fools wisely beat hooves and were long gone by the time the scowling
guards got to where all the noise was coming from.

Undeterred, however, they took a detour through the alleys to the next intersection, determined to see what had interrupted their rad shredding. The intersection was taken up by a particular mob of ponies wearing buttons and waving badly-lettered signs. A teal-colored mare with a bowl-cut mane-do, horn rimmed glasses, black lipstick that turned her lips into a grim line and a prominent nose piercing was standing on a rickety hoof-made platform, barking into a microphone. She was leading the crowd in a chant, or at least trying to.

“Oh great,” Bananas Foster snorted. “The college kids are down off Mount Pretentious to lecture the little pony again.”

“College kids?” Scootaloo said, cocking her head. “How can you tell?”

“Mostly by the smell of patchouli,” Mach said drily. “But also the pretentiousness.” It was true that most of the ponies at the center of the crowd were fairly young, though. There were a great number of baggy turtlenecks, nose and lip piercings, bowl cuts dyed in strange colors, dreadlocks and anemic goatees. The signage was a higgledy piggledy of slogans, acronyms, and symbols, only some of which Scootaloo could even make sense. Prevalent among them, though, was a particular symbol: a crown circled in red and crossed out. “Hey!” Spritz barked. “They're ripping me off! That's just like MY symbol! I oughta sue!”

It was true. Spritz's graffiti art always had one particular identifying feature: no matter how complex or simple, whether it was a colorful mural or more colorful slogan, somewhere in the image would be a circled and barred jester's cap; the semi-official logo of the Nobody's Fools. These ponies were using a symbol that looked like some lazy pony had traced Spritz's jester cap, twiddled it a bit to make the jester's cap look like a crown, and then passed it off as their own work. Many of the signs were crudely drawn in marker and crayon... but a lot of them looked like they'd been professionally printed. In bulk.

“Oh, these must be those 'crownbreaker' guys,” Scootaloo said. She squinted at the signs. “But it looks like they're calling themselves the... 'Ponies for Ethical and Accountable Royalty Succession’”

“PEARS?” Bowser said, scratching behind his ear in puzzlement. Nopony had an answer for that.

“More like NUTS,” somepony muttered.

“I dunno. Some of 'em say ‘PERSA. Others say ERPSA.... the printed looking ones say PARSE though.”

The disorganized chant was starting to become more coherent.

“Hey, Hey, Ho, Ho, Phony Princesses Gotta Go!
Hey, Hey, Ho, Ho, Phony Princesses Gotta Go!”

Only then did Scootaloo notice that the ponies backing up the chanter were waving effigies overhead; effigies of Celestia, Luna, Cadence--- and the Mane Six. Many of the signs had crude caricatures drawn of the neophyte princesses along with their rude slogans--- and way too many of them were of Rainbow Dash for Scootaloo's tastes.

The mare leading the chant was making an announcement: “And now a word from our founder--Poindexter Heraldry!” She stepped back from the microphone; another pony stepped up as the protesting ponies cheered and whistled. He was a lanky, creamicle-orange unicorn with a poorly dreadlocked yellow mane and a prominent adam's apple. He was wearing another variant of the
standard protester pony style; a stylishly scuffed and scruffy turtleneck sweater two sizes too big with round patches on the elbows, horn-rimmed glasses, and the fixed, earnest expression of the witlessly gormless who had found himself a Great and Important Cause. A cutie mark of a family crest could be seen on his hip, despite his obvious artless efforts to hide it below the sagging hem of his sweater. He seized the microphone and began to speak with the loud urgency of somepony trying to disclose the secret ingredient of Soylent Green before security closed in.

“Ponies of Equestria!” he said. “We are Ponies for an Accountable Royal Succession in Equestria! We have a message that must be heard...!” He held up a sheaf of papers in front of him in his magic and launched into his urgent, and to judge by the number of pages in his magical grip quite LONG, speech...

Presto came trotting up behind the group. He was towing a toy wagon loaded with boxes, bottles, jars, books, and Wheezer. Wheezer was studiously reading a shiny new comic. “Sorry we're late,” Presto said. “We had to stop at the book store. The latest Power Ponies was out, and there was a new edition of Fundamentals of Morphic Resonance...”

“Fine, whatever,” Mach grunted. “Not like we're going anywhere anyway.” He nodded in the direction of the podium. “ Blah Blah the Wonder Windbag up there is blocking the road.”

“Ah nuts,” Presto said. “I saw a couple of other little groups up and down Kessel Boulevard on the way here. Apparently they're doing a filibuster.”

“What's a filibuster?” Scootaloo asked.

“It's when somepony gets in the way and keeps talking and talking and talking until you finally punch them to shut them up,” growled Crackerjack.

“There's an old city ordinance that states that so long as the protesting group isn't obstructing traffic or disturbing the peace or breaking other laws, civil protests cannot be interrupted or broken up by the authorities,” Wheezer suddenly piped up. He took a hit off his inhaler and continued. “Of course you'll note that the ponies actually wearing those PEARS or PARSE or whatever pins aren't blocking traffic themselves... just all the ponies that stopped to gawk.”

“Activists figured out real quick that they could jam up the works for the whole city this way, and keep it that way till they got whatever it was they were demanding,” Presto added. “Some pony a hundred years ago lobbying for donkey and mule civil rights held out for six days like that, till city hall folded and revoked a bunch of bad laws.”

“Jim Crow,” Zonkey said. “big hero around here to us half-breeds.”

“Now every trust-fund foal on Scholar's Peak with Daddy issues tries to emulate him,” Mach snorted. “It's so we get a protest traffic jam every other weekend, almost.”

“And then there's THIS Poozer,” Foster said with a humorless grin, dramatically pointing at the ranting unicorn on the podium. Wheezer squinted at the pony, then picked up a pair of toy binoculars and stared at the speaker through them... or rather, the family crest emblazoned on his rump.

“Huh. Blue and gold divided quartedly, with a bar or baton sinister(3)-- supporters are unicorns rampant, can’t read the motto...” he said idly. “I’d need my ‘Prince Valor Fan Guide to Coats of Arms' to be sure...” he took a hit off an inhaler, squeaked and hawked for a moment in a squirrely falsetto, shaking his head to clear his throat again.

“Wait, that's his cutie mark?” Zonk said. He took the binoculars, looked and snorted. “I know that
guy. He's a total cake-eater, and a real jerk. I deliver pizzas to his fraternity all the time. The only
time he takes a break from lecturing everypony in earshot about the plight of the lower classes and
minorities is to talk down to the one delivering his dinner and try to cheat on his bill.”

“Sounds like a real charmer;” Mach one said drolly, crossing one leg over the other and leaning
against a lamppost. You could serve the sarcasm in his voice with a spatula. “I like his Nightmare
Night costume, though. I see he’s going as one of the Oppressed Proletariat. Artistically frayed
bohemian sweater and everything.” The others snickered.

“Oh man, hipsters,” Bananas Foster groaned. At Scootaloo's puzzled grunt, he sat down in the road,
gave her a grin and went into 'lecture' mode. “Tell me, young apprentice, do you know any
obnoxious, arrogant snobs?” Scootaloo thought of Diamond Tiara-- then of Diamond Tiara's mother-
- and nodded. “Good. You see, my dear out of town Newbie, a Hipster is an obnoxious arrogant
snob who decided that being an obnoxious arrogant snob wasn't obnoxious and arrogant enough.”

“Really??” Scootaloo boggled at the concept.

“Yes, really,” Foster went on. “They're obnoxious, arrogant, and trying to pose as one of the 'little
people.' To show how enlightened they are, of course."

"And don't forget 'trendy,' " Mach One said with an amused lip curl.

“Oh yes, oh so trendy too,” Foster agreed. "They're just too cool to like anything other ponies do.
They listen to bands that are so hip and trendy nopony's heard of them. They only read books
nopony else reads. They only drink cider that comes from orchards nopony's heard of. They spend
hundreds of bits at Equestrian Outfitters so they can look like they 'found' a new look dumpster-
diving for clothes at the charity house. They join new social causes nopony cares about. And if
anypony, anywhere ever starts getting into any of the stuff they are into, they'll spend all their time
telling you that they were doing it before you did. And then they stop liking it-- because now it's
'mainstream.'"

Scootaloo's brow furrowed. “So basically hipsters are like ponies trying to jump in ahead of a herd to
make it look like they're leading it,” she said.

Foster smirked and stroked his chin. “That's a pretty good way of putting it,” he admitted.

Scootaloo nodded. “But what happens if they like something nopony EVER likes? Or they really,
really like something that other ponies do too?”

“Oh well then, they like it 'ironically,' “ Foster said.

“What's 'ironically' mean?”

“Not even THEY know.”

While the Nobody's Fools jibed, Poindexter Heraldry was getting up a head of steam. He was all but
shouting into the microphone at this point, his tone strident. “You ask us what our cause is for being
here today--”

“No we didn't,” Crackerjack said. “Don't know, don't care.”

“--But our cause is evident!”

“Badly repressed Daddy issues?” Foster snarked.
"We are being done wrong by the government, nay, by the Crown itself!" Poindexter pontificated. "For centuries the common pony has gone unrepresented in the highest levels of power--"

"Yeah, all those poor downtrodden unicorn nobles, denied the throne for generations," somepony quipped.

"We have lived for generations, believing that Ascendancy was a rare, historical event, one carefully moderated and governed by our ever-lauded Sun Princess," Poindexter went on. "We accepted it when the lesser Princess, Mi Amore Cadenza, was brought forward. We understood when Princess Luna was returned from her long exile." He scowled fiercely. "But now Princess Celestia has lost all semblance of restraint and impartiality. She has foisted not one, but SIX new Alicorn Princesses on us in a single day! Six!

"Six utterly unaccountable, unworthy ponies raised to alicornhood and inflicted on us!" He had a full head of steam now. He pointed a hoof at Scholar's Peak, where the Thunderstreak was now docked. "Even now one of these overprivileged, undeserving ponies is being feted and feasted at Alicorn Academy by the professors of the university and the leaders of our city... enjoying the privileges of a crown that she received from Celestia's irresponsible pandering hoof as if it were a party favor---"

"And who is she? A scholar, a statespony, a ruler and leader? A pony with a legacy of noble heritage? No...she's an ATHLETE. A showboating wannabe who dropped out of flight school and who wasn't fit for anything till now but cloud-pushing--!

"Hey!" Scootaloo started forward fully intending to give the stallion a piece of her mind, preferably at the end of her hoof, but Mach One grabbed her tail and jerked her to a halt.

"Whoa, there, fangirl, you tryin' to get us busted by the Guard?" he said. He pointed with his chin, pointing out the watch ponies standing around the edges of the crowd, looking surly and irritated. "They're already honked they have to babysit this demonstration," he said, keeping his voice low. "And they're looking for an excuse to crack some heads. Let's not give it to them, okay?"

Scootaloo stopped trying to rush the stage. She was a little stunned. Really, the guard ponies here would do stuff like that?

The crowd at this point was divided. Most of them were just bored and curious, or annoyed at the interruption to their day. Quite a few were of a mind with Scootaloo and were booing the stallion, but almost as many others were beginning to make sounds of agreement with him. Scootaloo looked up at Mach, distraught. "We can't let him talk about Rainbow Dash like that!" she said. "She's not like that! None of them are! It's not right!"

Mach One stared at her. Scootaloo bit her lip and looked away. Not once had she even hinted that she was even in the entourage of "Princess Rainbow," much less that she was her honorary sister. Scootaloo had her pride after all; she didn't want anypony thinking she was flaunting it in other pony's faces like Diamond Tiara or Silver Spoon would... and she had a feeling that these guys would be the opposite of impressed if she did tell them anyway. But she wasn't going to just stand there and let some dumb ponies insult her honorary big sister, either...!

Mach looked down at her for a minute, then his expression changed. "Huh. Guess you are a princess fangirl, aren't you," he said after a moment. "Okay guys. Let's list off their crimes. These guys are makin' a ruckus in our town."

"They're saying mean things about ponies they don't even know," Softy said, looking hurt on the absent princesses' behalf.
“They busted up our race!” Crackerjack said, stamping a hoof.

“And they smell bad,” Bowser said, wrinkling his nose. “On purpose.” He’d passed by a couple of the patchouli-drenched protesters on the way. The others snorted and snickered.

“--And the most heinous crime of all,” Bananas Foster said, his voice all but rolling in sarcasm, “They're hipsters, and hipsters suck.”

“So stand the charges,” Mach one said. “All agreed?” There was a chorus of 'ayes.' “So be it, The Council of Dweebs has Spoken. The sentence? I'm calling Fair Game for the next--- oh, two hours--- on all the ponies running this protest.” There was muted cheering and some sinister chuckles.

“Remember the rules;,” Mach said with a glint in his eye. “One at a time, no permanent damage, no blood no foul, no bystanders, team-ups are okay, and first one caught ends the round.”

“Fair Game?” Scootaloo asked him.

Mach One smirked. “Watch and learn, newbie. Flute, you go first.”

The mute little pony got an absolutely evil smirk on his face. He crept forward till he was at the edge of the crowd and lit up his horn. A moment later, one of his sound-bubbles drifted off the end of his horn. Scootaloo had come to learn that Flute had a surprising amount of versatility with his magic; he could play musical notes, sound effects, even a short word or two like “Hey!” or “Yeah!” He could make the sound play right out of his horn, or generate a glowing little pearl of magic that would float around where he directed, playing the sound of choice.... or make it drift along, silently as a soap bubble, to a target of his choosing.

This time it was a “stealth” bubble. It drifted along near ground level, weaving among the hooves of the gathered ponies, too faint to see against the daylight, till it reached a dreadlocked mare standing next to the podium. It drifted silently under the hem of her fringed skirt. “And it is time,” Poindexter was saying, “That these Princesses started listening to the ninety-nine percent--”

FWERT.

Poindexter froze in mid sentence, his mouth hanging open, and stared in shock at the mortified mare from whom the incredibly loud fart had emanated. Scootaloo could see her shaking her head and mouthing protestations-- it wasn't me!-- that Poindexter clearly wasn't believing. The ponies next to her didn't look like they were believing it either.

After a pointed glare at the red faced mare, Poindexter obviously decided to ignore it. He turned his attention back to the microphone. “Ahem. As I was saying, it is time for the Princesses to heed--”

BRAPP.

This next eruption was so vehement it raised a dust cloud off the street. Several nearby ponies called out in disgust, and a couple of pegasi fanned their wings to try and blow the imagined fart-cloud away. Poindexter rounded on the mortified mare, glaring. “Oh for heaven's sake, Musical Fruit, if you weren't feeling well after eating bean burritos for breakfast you should have--” ... Unfortunately he had turned his tail to the microphone, and never saw the faint bubble of magic floating up and into the receiver.

PRRROOOOWPPP-P-P-p-p-p.

Poindexter spun about to stare down at the microphone, horrified.

URP.
The flustered college activist frantically slapped the 'mute' button on the microphone, shutting the speakers off. Nothing could be heard, but he and the others were obviously throwing snark at one another over his unexpected eructation.

Flute and Scootaloo leaned against each other, helpless with smothered laughter. Bananas Foster hmmmed and rubbed his chin. “Ahh, the old one-note-trumpet joke. Not exactly novel but on the other hoof you can't beat the classics... Plus that belch at the end was a nice little twist. I give it... 3 stars. Next?”

“Allow me...” Presto chuckled. He began rifling through the contents of his wagon. When he resurfaced he was holding a strange looking metal wand, one with a tiny sonar dish on the end and a lightning bolt shaped button in the handle. “Little something I, ah, procured from the Weather Factory,” he said to the others. “Excuse me, I have to get a clear shot...” He sneaked off around the fringes of the crowd, mysteriously with nary a jingle to give his position away.

At the podium, Poindexter had managed to bark his minions back in line. With a static 'click' and a 'wwooot' he turned the portable mike back on. “Apologies. Ahem. Technical difficulties. But as I was saying: for literal generations we mere mortals have been kept, deliberately, at a terrible disadvantage--”

Presto had gotten around the side of the crowd and was now leaning far to casually against a nearby wall, standing behind a rainbarrel. Concealed by the folds of his homemade wizard's robes, he sighted down the length of the wand and pulled the trigger.

“What is that thing??” Scootaloo asked between cackles of laughter.

“Dunno what it's called, but construction pegasi use it to lay down lightning veins in permacloud, keep 'em from building up a dangerous charge,” Foster said. “But as you can see it has interesting side effects if you use it on a pony...” His grin threatened to split his face as he pointed. Scootaloo looked. Unnoticed by any of the PEARs ponies, the manes and tails of every pony around the podium, including Poindexter's, was beginning to stand on end. Soon every loose hair on their bodies was standing straight out like a cartoon wig. The ponies in the crowd began to notice and laughter spread as the PARSE ponies' manes and tails began bushing out like gigantic dandelion fluff.

Poindexter stared out at the crowd in confusion, totally oblivious to his startling new mane-do. “---What--?”

**BZZAT!**

It was then that the massive static charge accumulated in his mane and tail decided to ground out. Static electricity leapt from every point on his body. He began dancing a mad tarantella with a freestyle accompaniment from the megaphone pressed spasmodically to his lips--

“**BAWDIDIBAWDEBANGDIGGITYDIGGITYHOOPBANGWOPSHOPADOOBY--**”

His flailing limbs brushed against the nearest of his static-fluffed neighbors, setting off a chain reaction that hit every pony in the group. Shrieks, yips and wild spasms filled the square as sparks of static electricity leaped from hipster to hipster, sending them leaping into the air or jitterbugging where they stood.

Once the zapping finally stopped, the members of PARSE began squabbling amongst themselves as to who was responsible, oblivious to their audience-- which was in danger of splitting its sides laughing.
This went on a few minutes, but the rattled protest ponies reached a consensus that the dry, cool weather— and hence the Government— was to blame for the rather nasty static buildup, and of course started yelling for somepony in authority to do something. Several imperious shouts were made at the suddenly highly professional and totally oblivious guards standing around for SOME PONY to PLEASE push a few clouds this way to help humidify the air a little before there was another freak electrical incident...

“That's my cue,” Spritzer said suddenly. He went aloft, fishing through his saddlebags. “Yeah, I got four, five.... Hey, someone tell Presto I'm gonna be out of invisible paint after this...” he flew off.

“I spend way too much time around here repeating what somepony just said,” Scootaloo noted. “Invisible Paint?”

“Little something Presto mixed up for Spritz,” Crackerjack said. “I think I know what he's gonna do with it, too--- but I don't wanna spoil it...” A moment later a small cloud— presumably Spritzer-- went flying by overhead and parked itself over the protesters. He was out of sight to those below, but the Fools were far back enough to see Spritzer peek over the top of the cloud, a spray bottle in each hoof. He emptied both of them into the air, sending a clear mist showering down over the ponies below. He finished them off and pulled out two more.

Poindexter and his cronies visibly relaxed as the cool mist settled over them. Deed done, Spritz abandoned the cloud and rejoined the others. Scootaloo looked at him, confused and a little disappointed. “That was it?” she said. “You sprayed them with a plant mister?”

“Give it about five minutes,” Spritz said.

“Aaaand that's MY cue, if I wanna get my turn,” Bananas Foster said. With a flourish, Foster produced... an oversized toy microphone. “You know, these little Flim Flam brothers portable Magic Mikes are nifty. Loads of fun. You can use 'em to make your voice play over any speaker or radio or whatever that's in range. Had this one since I was a little colt; it was my favorite toy. You can't find 'em anywhere anymore, though. They quit making them when they found out they had a bad design flaw.

“You can't turn the wireless feature off. Observe...” He fiddled with a dial on his microphone, cleared his throat, and lifted it to his lips.

Up on the podium, Poindexter was pressing on. “You can see here how ponies conspire against us! But we must press on; I have a message to share with all of Equestria---”

His voice cut out, and was replaced by the voice of Bananas Foster. “--- that I dance the cha cha like a sissy, and my mother dresses me funny!”

Poindexter stared at his own microphone as if it had transformed into a venomous snake. Scootaloo saw his lips move...

“--Yeah, I likea do the Cha-Cha. Cha-cha doodle alla live-long day--” Foster recited into his Magic Mike.

Poindexter, now completely rattled, began (to judge by his rapidly moving mouth) to shout into the microphone.

Foster, however, provided the dialogue. “YABLALBALBLABAARBLBLABSBBRRR! HAHBALBLA! BLARAGALBLAAR! BOOGA BLEEEHHH DOOODOO CACA---PEE PEE!”

The crowd of onlookers roared. The Nobody's Fools, hiding in their narrow alleyway, rolled on the
A moment later microphone and the microphone stand both came sailing over the crowd's heads to smash against a nearby lamppost. Poindexter, now thoroughly rattled, started screaming imprecations at the pony running the portable sound system. The scruffy goateed stallion shrugged helplessly as Poindexter ranted at him.

“AaaAAaaaand that was Poindexter Heraldry, Fillies and Gentlecolts. Sharing his views, his cause, his indecipherable speech impediment!” Foster continued cheerfully, his voice as smooth and mellifluous as any DJ. “Be sure and stop by next week to catch another performance, where he’ll shower us all with more of the wisdom and spittle a trust fund can buy--”

The members of PEARS had fallen on their sound system and yanked the plug out. It did no good. Like all Flim Flam products, when the Magic Mike malfunctioned it did so with a vengeance. Powerless or not the speakers continued to broadcast Foster's voice. Foster cranked up the power on the Magic Mike. Several of the stores on the street had outdoor intercoms; these began broadcasting his voice as well.

“But now as the sun pulls away from the shore, and our ship slowly sinks in the West, we the perpetually offended Ponies of PARSE, PEARS, ERSAP, REAPS, and fifteen other meaningless acronyms for our pretentious cause must go. We have places to go, ponies to annoy, traffic to block, and support checks from Daddy to deposit. So we bid you a fond farewell for the day.

“And now, a little musical number...” A tinny samba beat began to play.

“Oh my name is Cuban Pete
I'm the king of the Rhumba Beat
When I play the maracas I go
Chick chicky boom
Chick chicky boom--”

Total chaos reigned. The crowd of passersby, still stuck in the pony protester's traffic jam, were howling with laughter. Even the Nobody's Fools were gasping for air. The watch ponies standing guard (those who weren't helpless with laughter) had finally decided that the uproar constituted 'disturbing the peace' or close enough to it, and had waded through the crowd to confront the now squabbling members of PEARS. One guard was yelling right in Poindexter's face; Poindexter was yelling back, loud enough that he was going pink in the face.

Scootaloo's eyes went wide. In fact, all of them were going pink in the face. They were going pink in the everything. As she watched, every member of the group—every member that had stood under Spritz's 'humidifying mist'—slowly turned bright coral pink from nose to tail, clothing and all.

“Finally,” Spritz said. “I was starting to wonder. It usually doesn't take so long for it to dry...”

Poindexter and his fellows were just noticing their new palette. The shrieks, especially from the females, redoubled. Spritz, looking a little guilty, grabbed the Magic Mike and spoke into it. “Calm down, you ponies, it's not permanent. It'll come off the next time they take a shower!”

“Dear Maker, it IS permanent--!” Foster quipped into the microphone, grinning madly.

The crowd heard that and lost it. Some were laughing so hard they were weeping. The neon-pink protesters did not look so amused. Presto came running back to join them and hastily put on his wagon harness.
“It seems Windy City's best and brightest have spotted us,” he said unnecessarily, pointing back. Indeed, several guards were closing in. Some were following Presto with set looks on their faces. Others had their eyes riveted on Foster and Spritz, who were still wrestling over the Magic Mike.

“Well, looks like it's time to go--!” Mach One said. “Everypony, time to play Ditch the Doofus. Newbie, Flute, you stay with me... Presto?”

The Fool's ersatz magician had stowed away his Wand of Static Zap and had pulled a new one out. This one was made of a peeled tree branch and had a purple crystal tied to the tip with copper wire. “Just buying a little extra time, fearless leader,” he said. He waved the wand in his hoof and then thrust it at the approaching guards with a grunt; Scootaloo didn't know how she knew, but she got the strongest impression he was trying to push his earth pony quintessence out of his hoof and through the wand at them.

The crystal sparkled briefly. At first nothing seemed to happen. Then the two nearest guards got the most surprised look on their faces, and suddenly began sliding across the paving stones towards each other. They collided with a clang, and seemingly became stuck to one another. The two immediately began struggling to push themselves apart. The other guards tried to either edge around them or help them, only to suddenly get stuck to their compatriots as well. In seconds half a dozen armored ponies found themselves in a tangled ball of of thrashing limbs, clanking armor and swearing.

“Hah! Clover the Clever's Magnetizing Resonance Field Morphosis! It DOES work with earth pony quintessence!” One of the patrol ponies pulled free, only to be dragged back, swearing. “Whups, we probably better get going before it wears off...” Presto took off galloping down the alley, Wheezer hanging onto the wagon for dear life. The others took off after him, most of them barely able to keep their balance from laughing so hard.

“Ditch the Doofus” was a simple enough strategy; The moment the Nobody's Fools exited the alleyway they scattered in groups of two or three, disappearing into the city's maze of back streets and alleyways. As planned, Flute and Scootaloo stuck to Mach One's side. The older colt led them through a tangled web of tunnels, trails, and back routes nopony could possibly follow, parkouring over obstacles, boosting the other two wherever they needed it.

After nearly ten minutes of flat-out running/skating/scootering, they finally came to a halt. They walked out the burn, catching their breath. After a few minutes of panting, the three looked at each other and started laughing. Mach with his quiet, I'm-too-cool chuckle; Scootaloo giggling shamelessly; Flute with his funny, totally silent laughter. “That was totally... awesome!” Scootaloo gasped.

Mach One gave her a half-smile. “So glad you approve,” he said. Scootaloo giggled, then her smile got a little more sober. “Thanks,” she said. “For, y'know, sticking up for Rainbow Dash. And the other new Princesses,” she added hastily. She hunched her shoulders and looked aside. “I... know you don't really like them much--”

“Says who?” Mach One said, surprised, frowning a little.

Scootaloo's gaze drifted further aside. “You get this funny look on your face whenever somepony mentions them,” she said.

Mach thought that over for a second and sighed. “Look, Newbie, It's not like I dislike them or nothing,” he said. “I don't know them well enough to feel one way or the other about them. I... guess they're okay; from what I've seen in the papers they seem to be nice. They're certainly pretty enough.” He huffed and smirked. “Princess Rainbow's definitely a hottie--”
"Ooooo," Scootaloo said, teasing. Flute cast a magic bubble that let off a wolf whistle.

"Hey, she's a Wonderbolt. All that exercise has left her lookin' fine, is all I'm saying," Mach grinned. "But no, I don't hate 'em."

"But you don't like them," Scootaloo pressed.

Mach sighed, and for some strange reason looked up at Scholar's Peak, floating among the clouds in the sky. "No, I don't really care for 'em," he admitted. His expression soured a little. "Like I said, I don't hate 'em. But from where I'm standing, all these new princesses are just another layer of ponies put there to boss us around and lord it over us. Push us around, cheat us, tax us, pass laws against us, toss us in jail if they don't like us..."

Scootaloo was shocked. "They're not--- they wouldn't--" she stammered.

Mach looked at her. "They wouldn't do that to us little ponies? That what you're trying to say?" he seemed strangely calm. "Well that's not the point, kid. The point is that they could, and that nopony would stop them if they did. The world... the world shouldn't be built that way."

Scootaloo was stricken. Mach must have seen the look on her face because he went on. "Hey look, that's just how it is. I'm not saying these princesses would--- Like I said, Princess Rainbow seems pretty chill. but what about the next alicorn? Or the one after that? the world's full of ponies who want to put themselves up high, so that they can look down at everypony else. Sooner or later they're going to ascend somepony who does like to lord it over everypony else. And then what?"

"But, to be fair, Everypony does it a little bit I guess. Want to boss other ponies around or look down on them, I mean." He looked up at the fat bellies of the clouds overhead. "Shoot, why do you think pegasi live up in the clouds?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" Scootaloo said, offended.

"Oh really?" He gave her a humorless half-smile. "Come on, think about it. What the hell is up there? Nuthin' but clouds and air. You can't grow anything up there, can't build nuthin' permanent up there, can't mine or farm or do anything else that ponies have to do. Shoot, you can't even keep FURNITURE up there without special magic... So why does anypony live up there?"

"I'll tell you why; to look down on everypony else that can't. The great and glorious ancient Pegasus empire couldn't even FEED itself, and they still woulda DIED rather than get their hooves dirty on grass and dirt. Because there was nothing lower than being a dirt pony, and living on a cloud let them look down and sneer at everypony else who couldn't. Practically, and literally. And deep down, every pegasi--- especially the high mucky muck bigwig pegasi-- still feels the same way, at least a little bit."

"YOU'RE a pegasus!" Scootaloo said angrily.

Mach gave a short little laugh. "And in spite of all that I just said, do you know what I'd give just to be up there? And don't deny it, you're the same way."

"But you think they want pegasi like me-- like us-- up there anyway?" He rolled back his left wingsleeve, let the scarred stump, little more than a knobby bump under his skin, poke out. "See that stump? That embarrasses pegasi, makes 'em upset. They don't even like looking at a pegasus that's got a damaged body. That's another reason the Great and Glorious Ancient Pegasi lived in clouds; it made it real easy to get of the sick and weak. Just one little slip, one little push, and that crippled foal that was shaming your family's warrior name was gone. Easy way to thin the herd..."
"Ponies aren't like that now," Scootaloo protested. She knew the stories from ancient history, and had been horrified by them. But ponies were different now.

"Really?" His voice stayed calm but his eyes grew stormy. "We like to talk about how much better we are than those days, how much kinder and decent. But ain't it interesting how even today Pegasi don't use guard rails?"

Scootaloo's mouth hung open in shock. She tried to think of something to say in protest... but then she remembered Rainbow Dash's and Fluttershy's stories of how cruel the other pegasus foals had been to Fluttershy—Fluttershy, the kindest, sweetest pony in the world—just because she was a weak flier. She remembered how the pegasus colts in the Pegasus Quarter had treated her, just because she used a mechanical glider to get around the pegasus side of the city.

"Yeah, I can see you thinking of a few things," Mach said. "Kind of paints an ugly picture, doesn't it? Fit healthy pegasi living up in the clouds where their crippled relatives can't bother them. But don't think I'm just dumping on us Pegasus. like I said; everypony does it.

"Why do you think the Unicorns put the Academy up on Scholar's Peak? Or Canterlot up on the side of a mountain? Too much ground for pegasi, too much sky for earth ponies. Heck, even Earth ponies do it. In the city they build skyscrapers and mansions with rent noone can afford, and in the country if you can't bench press ten times your weight or they catch you using your wings or your magic to do stuff they do with their muscles, they treat you like you're feeble minded as well as feeble bodied. I've seen 'em do it.

"Ain't Equestria wonderful? All three races live in harmony all right; they all build homes for themselves where all the other 'lesser' ponies won't bother them. Oh you can live anywhere you want--- so long as you're rich enough to pay for cloudwalking spells, or sky-high rent in a skyscraper, or you can buy your way in with the unicorn snobs in their gated communities and hire unicorn butlers to do all the magic for you. Which means nopony has to worry about their neighborhood getting cluttered up with the POOR, either."

"Ponies aren't LIKE that," was all Scootaloo could say in protest. She could feel her eyes tearing up.

"Oh really?" Mach chuckled. They were passing through a small park. He sat down on a bench. "Tell me, kid, you ever hear the folk story about Special Snowflake, or whatever her name was? That fairy tale about the pegasus filly who supposedly made the first snowflake?"

"Yeah, that's right. Never thought of that, did ya? Neither did I, when I was your age. Or how about finding the poor little orphan a FOSTER PARENT? Or at
least a teacher that didn't leave little blind fillies to fend for themselves?

“I hated that story. I mean, what kind of teacher lets a blind orphan wander off alone into a blizzard? What kind of kids pick on a filly and shun her for being blind? What kind of all-powerful princesses look at a little blind orphan, and instead of healing her or helping her they pat her on the head, give her a meaningless prize for making a pretty snowflake, and then send her on her way?”

“It didn't actually HAPPEN, no. It's just a really schlocky folk story. But it was just how ponies thought back then, when the story was made. And still do today, way deep down.

“And if you ask me, deep down nothing's changed. Or not deep enough, anyway.” He wiggled the stump of his wing at Scootaloo, making her stomach flip. “I lost my wing when I was a foal. It grew in wrong, shrunk and shrivelled, and the doctors had to cut it off.

“Equestria's been around for over a thousand years. We have magic out the wing wong. I've seen unicorns turn bluebirds into frickin' oranges and grow hundred-year old trees out of acorns in seconds. You know what kind of hope I had? What kind of treatments I could get? Nuthin', that's what. Tell me, Scootaloo, why haven't those high and mighty Unicorn scholars up on top of the mountain come up with a spell yet to grow my wing back?” He nodded at Flute. “Or how about something even easier: why haven't they got a magical cure for Flute's voicebox, huh? Why can't they even fix poor Wheezer's allergies?

“Why, after a thousand years, haven't they got houses in Cloudsdale that non-pegasi can live in? Or at least walkways for the ones who can't fly? Why do towns like Ponyville have rules against using magic on things like Winter Wrap Up? Shouldn't getting the job done be more important? Why don't you see any nobility in Canterlot who aren't Unicorns? Why is it that all the gifted schools are for gifted UNICORNS? Why after a thousand years can't even the integrated Unicorn Universities teach Earth ponies or Pegasi, who are supposed to be 'just as magical' as Unicorns, how to do real magic? Why, after a thousand years, don't any of them have healers finding CURES?

“I'll tell you why. They're too busy feeling special for how "nice" they are to us. They NEED us down here at the bottom. They need somepony to patronize and parade around on Feel Sorry for the Cripple Day and tell heartwarming inspirational stories about and to tell “you're not handicapped, your Handi-CAPABLE--” he snorted bitterly at that. "They need earth ponies who want to be wizards, so they can make folk tales about how you should be happy with what you are and getting above your station will make you unhappy."

“When I lost my wing as a foal, I lost any hope of ever flying, They were all rushing around telling me how it didn't matter, that I was still a Special Snowflake even if I never flew, it didn't really matter.... I'd lost my wing forever, and it didn't really matter.” he seethed quietly at that for a moment. “Even while they were picking out a retirement home for pegasus cripples like me to stick me in.

“I've talked to ponies in the rest homes. Pegasi from all over Equestria. You know what they say pegasi most everywhere call Windy City? Cripple Hill. This is where they bring their rejects. When they get tired of dealing with us, they bring us here to dump us, and forget us. And maybe come by and cry a few crocodile tears on us every now and then for the cameras... Sad little ponies in the snow.

“It's a dumping ground for other losers too. But you can figure that out by looking at our little group..."Pegasi like Foster's family who make more money than Celestia's cake chef--- but have to crawl on their bellies to get the aristocracy to accept them because they're not unicorns, the farming
community to accept them because they're not earth ponies, and the pegasus community to accept them because they work in the dirt growing bananas.

“A runty little unicorn with a fighting cutie mark, born to a family of earth ponies built like clydesdales, who could whip his weight in tigers, but who none of the gyms or dojos will accept because 'unicorns are weak.'

“A pony who wants to do magic, but he's an earth pony so the professors on Scholar's Peak won't even give him the time of day.

“A pony raised by diamond dogs... you know, Bowser's parents left Diamond Dog society because they wanted Bowser to learn about his Pony heritage? But they had to move to Windy City because everywhere else, racist ponies would refuse to serve them or buy or sell with them, or even chase them out of their shops because they think they'll steal everything or give them fleas.

“And look at you! You can't fly, even though you have enough wingpower to drag a half-dozen ponies behind you. And I bet you're like Flute; you've been to a jillion 'medical experts' for your problem, haven't you? And all they can do is stand around with their hooves up their butts, shrugging their shoulders.... and telling you how you should embrace your wonderfulcrippleness because you're a Special Snowflake.

“ I've spent my whole life watching the haves do nothing but pat the have-nots on the head and saying "Be ye warmed and clothed and fed" and toddling on their way, pleased with themselves for being so nice to the lower class. Are any of this new batch of royalty going to be any different? Tell me, when they found out you couldn't fly, did any of that herd of princesses show up at your door to help you? Did any of them even try? Either they can't or they won't, and I don't know which is worse...."

He looked Scootaloo in the eye and snorted softly. “The magical land of Equestria, where all-powerful Princesses can turn a pegasus into an alicorn... but they can't turn a non-flying pegasus into a flying one. So yeah, I'm not too excited about getting a whole bunch of new royalty.”

He got to his hooves. “I guess this is where we split up. I'll see you squirts later.”

Scootaloo felt like her heart had sunk to the bottom of her hooves. Everything he'd said had been another devastating little blow. But the worst part of the whole lecture, worse than anything he'd said, was that he'd never even raised his voice. He'd said every bit of it in that same calm, quiet, casually disinterested way he'd started. Like that was his verdict; this was how the Universe sucked, and that was the way it was always going to be.

“Mach.... you don't hate them for not helping you. Do you?” she pleaded to his departing back.

He paused in his tracks and looked over his shoulder at her. “Maybe a little. Just... a little. I know they can't be everywhere and fix everything, but...” he stopped, his lips pressed together. "It's nothing personal," he said. "It's just that deep down there's a part of me that's still this little colt who spent the last day in the hospital before his operation, writing letters in crayon to Princess Celestia, begging her to come fix his wing before they cut it off for good...."

He shook his head. "It's dumb, I know. After all, they may have ascended-- but they're still just ponies stuck in a world they didn't make, like the rest of us. Even Celestia and Luna. I know that in my head at least. Who knows, if we knew each other personally we might actually like each other.” He smiled, reflective. “Heh. Princess Rainbow seems like a cool filly, at least. I wonder if she liked that rose?” he said to nopony in particular. “Eh, don't let me moping get you down, all right? See you at the hideout tomorrow; we're gonna go to the North Face.”
“I'm there!” Scootaloo said. She put on her best gutsy grin and waved as Flute and Mach rolled off. Once they'd rolled out of sight she sat down and sighed. What a day. First all that mayhem on Kessel Road. And now everything Mach had said was bubbling around in her brain....

*I wonder if Princess Rainbow liked that rose?*

Suddenly she was remembering Rainbow Dash telling her about the 'saboteur' at the Cloudiseum. His pranking, his athletic stunts, *the long-stemmed rose he'd left behind*....

Two long-separated synapses finally clicked into place. “Oh, horseapples,” she said.

---

1) A carryover from the era of the Three Tribes, expanded for a more industrial age. For those who might wonder exactly how formidable the ancient nation of Pegasopolis really was, and how they could hold their ground against the likes of an army of magic-wielding unicorns... take note: Pegasians used thunderstorms the way we would use battleships, and their idea of a naval battle was to build a hurricane, man it with several thousand legionnaires, and send it out to scour the ocean-- and the enemy coastline-- clean. It wasn't just the potential wrath of Celestia and Luna that kept Equestria safe from its enemies for centuries at a stretch.

2) Even ponies don't generally have manes that are naturally fluorescent.

3) A feature of a family crest or Coat of Arms denoting lineage descending from an illegitimate child.... in other words, *Poindexter* (meaning left-handed) Heraldry was a royal bastard. Yes, it's a heraldry joke.

4) And somewhere in Canterlot, the hysterical giggling coming from a certain chaos lord's bedroom was giving the castle staff the cold sweats.
Chapter 46

Celestia's dawn graced the sky, gilding the mountain and touching the clouds with brush-strokes of orange and gold. Ponies all over the city stirred with the dawn. But, even as the first rays of Celestia's sun fell on them, their warming beams were scattered and divided. The Windy City weather factory was already long awake and churning with activity. The bowels of the cloud factory rumbled with faint thunder as construction clouds of every size and form rolled in a steady parade out the great double doors. They slowly spooled out around the twin peaks, then re-spooled in a great spiral cloud over the broad and fertile Lee Valley. Cloud construction pegasi swarmed, ants on a mountain slope, shaping columns, archways, and balconies out of cloudstuff, the Thunderdome swiftly taking shape under their hooves. The farmers living there looked up at the rumbling clouds, thanked the Maker for the relief of the shade, and looked forward in anticipation to the coming rain...

“Good afternoon, Princess!”

Dash started to look over her shoulder at the gryphon prince's greeting and caught herself. Right, 'Princess' meant HER, now. “How much longer am I gonna keep doing that?” she mumbled to herself.

“Probably not as long as I will,” the gryphon prince chuckled. “I'll be looking over my shoulder for who just came in when someone says 'your Majesty' till I'm ninety, at least.” He paced up to stand beside her, looking out over the Cloudiseum. “Ah, I am in time to watch your Wonderbolts practicing their routines,” he said, pleased.

He was correct; the Wonderbolts were scattered out in the empty coliseum, taking advantage of the open airspace to warm up and rehearse. The first big show was less than 24 hours away, and the new routines were getting a last minute shakedown. “Yeah,” Dash said. “just shakin' off the dust one last time. Feel free to sit in and watch if you like...”

“Don't mind if I do,” Prince Ajax said, stepping out onto the balcony next to her. “Shall you be joining them, Highness?” he asked, waving a claw to indicate her garb. At the moment she was dressed in her training gear: a worn leotard, sweatband and goggles.

“In a few,” she admitted. “but first I wanna see how everypony else is shaping up. Pull up a cloud.” She patted the cloudtop next to her; he grinned and complied.

For once, Rainbow Dash had lucked out on the whole upper crust social-fu angle. She and Prince Ajax had hit it off almost from the start. They had a surprising amount in common, after all; both were athletic, adventurous types from unsophisticated backgrounds (Ajax and his father had been wilderness guides and explorers) who had been suddenly raised to heights of prominence that they truthfully weren't sure they were quite ready for.

It had taken one fancy formal banquet to figure it out, too; a half hour into the excruciating proceedings and they'd caught each other getting frantically whispered advice from their advisers on which fork to use. They'd looked each other in the eye, started laughing and couldn't stop. Rainbow Dash wondered if Harshwhinny would ever forgive her for throwing things off the rails and ordering pizza.... “So, whaddya think?” she said, waving a hoof out at the cloudiseum.

Ajax “hmm”ed. “You seem to have made the show larger by quite a bit,” he said. “And added a lot
of... unique variety, for a military airshow.” He cocked an eyebrow.

“Yeah, well,” Rainbow Dash averred. “The Wonderbolts haven't strictly been a military division in a long time. Their role has been sorta... promotional. Morale, public relations, that sorta stuff.” She fluffed her wings. “We were... sorta in a rut. Resting on our laurels. We're trying to change that, now.”

“I can see,” Ajax said. He nodded at a trio of cloud platforms floating in the near foreground. A silvery-white mare in a practice leotard was rehearsing there, running through a complex aerial ballet routine with two backup dancers and a partner. She leapt and floated between the three platforms, graceful as a swan, her tiny orange counterpart matching her move for move.

Rainbow Dash blinked and did a double take. Yes, there was Scootaloo, in a maroon leotard, doing an aerial routine with Velvet Slipper. She leapt, somersaulted and pirouetted, extending her leaps from platform to platform hanging air for the briefest of moments then fluttering down to land en pointe.

“--And a five, six, seven, eight!” Velvet called out. “Very good, Everypony. You too Scootaloo! Your hangtime is improving. Remember to spread your wings when you stick the landing... okay, let's call it for today. Don't want to over-rehearse before tomorrow...”

“Thanks, Velvet Slipper,” Scootaloo said, beaming. She followed the others and grabbed a bottled water and a towel from a nearby table. She trotted up the stadium steps, not even seeing Dash and Ajax or their retinue till she almost bumped into them. “Oh!” Uh, hi, Dash--” her eyes darted around and she looked away awkwardly. “...Y-you were watching?”

“Yeah! Looking pretty good out there, Squirt,” Rainbow Dash enthused. “Heh. You planning on taking a place in the airshow?”

“She certainly could, if she wished,” Ajax interjected in a musing tone.

“Really?”

“Really. Hoofbump, c'mon, don't leave me hangin’.” Scootaloo smiled and clapped her hoof against Dash's outstretched one. “So this is where you've been spending all your time? Learning ballet with Velvet Slipper?”

“Some of it,” Scootaloo admitted. She hesitated. “That and hanging with some local kids... um... Dash? There's something I need--”

“Excuse me your Highness.” The guards behind them parted and Commissioner Gold Star joined the group.
Dash rolled her eyes and stifled a groan. One of the joys of this Princess gig, she thought; you can't
stand still in one place for more than a minute without it turning into a flipping meeting. “Hold on a
few, kiddo,” she said, pushing Scootaloo in the direction Velvet Slipper and the other dancers had
headed. “Go on and shower up or somethin... we'll talk later. Looks like more Princess biz for now.”
Scootaloo trotted off, rejoining Velvet slipper and joining the chatter about the rehearsal. Rainbow
Dash went back to Gold Star.“Good to see you, Gold Star. You got an update on the, ah, search?”

“No as such,” he said. “I'm more here to give you an update on the Crownbreakers investigation.”
He looked hesitantly at Prince Ajax. “Um, there are some sensitive matters involved, your majesty,”
he said to the gryphon prince. “If we could beg your pardon...”

Ajax held up a claw. “I'm afraid I'm going to have to insist on hearing this myself,” he said, his
expression growing a bit stern. “I'm not totally naíve, Commissioner; I know you want to put your
city's best hoof forward, but my own security gryphons have been-- keeping tabs on this situation
with these political dissidents. You can either let my security officer winnow it out for herself later...
or let me hear it, ah, straight from the horse's mouth.” The corner of his mouth twitched upward in
amusement.

Gold Star hesitated, then blew out a sigh. “Very well. As I was saying, we've been looking into the
Crownbreakers, trying to get an angle on their leadership.”

“And who are their leaders?” Ajax asked.

“That's the thing. We don't know. And that's unsettling; these student radical groups almost always
have some leader with a big mouth and a big ego leading things, but we can't seem to get a straight
answer on who's in charge. Not even the Crownbreakers seem to know for sure.... Oh there's a
couple of big mouths up front, like that Poindexter colt, but even he says he's not the leader. We've
been rounding up and interrogating anypony we can lay hoof on--- from ponies that show up at the
demonstrations to ones just handing out fliers and wearing the buttons. But whoever's running this
thing has managed to keep themselves completely incognito.”

“That's.... not good,” Dash said, her voice flat. Ajax scowled in agreement.

Gold Star nodded, his expression cynical. “But that's less of a concern at the moment.”

“You have unknown subversive elements agitating your college youth into political radicals and this
isn't an immediate concern?” Ajax said, disbelieving.

“Oh, make no mistake, these stick-stirrers are going to get my FULL attention when I get around to
them,” Gold Star said grimly. “But something's happened recently that is a little more urgent.
Somepony in the Crownbreaker rank and file has started issuing overt threats.”

“Threats?” Dash bristled.

Gold Star nodded. He pulled a scroll out of his pannier and unrolled it for her to read. It was long
and densely worded, and at the bottom in lieu of a signature was a stamp: a jester's cap... or maybe a
crown... circled and barred. “Sent a manifesto to the mayor's office,” he said. “Usual bla-de-blah, but
it also makes reference to being 'driven to action' and 'grim necessity of violence'... and to the
Thunderdome--- the 'airborne symbol of Royal arrogance'--- and a promise to take violent action on
opening night... to, quote, “prove once and for all the impotence of the new aristocracy' and 'remove
that monument to her arrogance from our sky.’”

“What??” Dash bristled in outrage.
Gold Star's lip curled. “As you can imagine, His Honor the Mayor is freaking. He's demanding I go out and arrest somepony, anypony...” He snorted. “And he's made it very clear he'd really really like it if I started by rounding up the Nobody's Fools.”

“Why do you think it's THEM that did it?” Dash said. “I mean, it's obvious the Mayor's got a mad-on about these kids, but--”

Gold Star pointed to the seal at the bottom of the page. “This is their logo, isn't it?” he said rhetorically. Dash squinted at it. It sort've looked like the tag they'd seen when the Nobody's Fools had pranked the stadium. Close, anyway.

“It's too similar to be a coincidence,” Gold Star said. “It's more than enough to round them up for questioning.”

“And you haven't yet beeeeee-cause...?” Dash prodded, her voice showing her growing annoyance.

Gold Star looked abashed. “Because we haven't--”

“Haven't figured out who any of them are yet,” Dash finished the sentence with him, her eyebrows forming a flat line. “You know, chief, I don't wanna criticize the law but you're really batting a no-hitter with this...”

Gold Star huffed, but went on. “Like I said, they've been doing this for years,” Gold Star said. “So they're really really good at it. They always wear disguises, they always cover their cutie marks, they never seem to use the same group of ponies to pull off a prank twice-- in fact they've been around long enough for their entire membership to change out-- they always have an escape route and they seem to know when the Guards are coming before the Guards even do...” he shook his head. "That, and... the few we do corner, or manage to recognize, they've never really done anything serious enough to justify an arrest warrant," he shrugged. "We're not dumb, we do recognize a few of them from time to time... but they're incredibly careful or incredibly lucky, and manage to keep just out of our reach."

“Young, skilled, rebellious; just the sort of group that a political troublemaker would like to get their talons on,” Prince Ajax said somberly. He scowled.

“So what's your next move?” Dash asked Gold Star.

“That's up to you, Highness,” Gold Star said.

Scootaloo stood in the shadows and listened. She had raced to the showers and back, practically running through the showers like a filly racing through a lawn sprinkler, grabbed her saddlebags and raced back. She now dawdled at the archway, just around the corner from the landing where Dash and the Sheriff-guy were holding their little meeting, and was eavesdropping for all she was worth.

She'd never known what the phrase 'feeling torn' meant before. Now she did. It felt like she was being pulled apart, ripped down the middle between her mentor Rainbow Dash and The Nobody's Fools. The Fools would never be part of whatever those Crownbreakers were plotting!

Or would they? The Nobody's Fools were all... misfits. And while they weren't criminals or anything, they did sort of skirt on the edge of things an awful lot.

And there was certainly no love lost between them and City Hall, especially the mayor... she snorted in disgust. Not that anypony could ever blame them. She'd met the Mayor coming and going more than once; he'd treated her like she was a hoodlum in the making just because she was a kid... until he'd learned that she was 'flight disabled.' Then he'd treated her like she was mentally retarded. If
there was a reporter nearby he'd throw some glurge about how she was such a brave little handicapped filly and how charitable the Princess of Loyalty was for letting her hang out with her...

Gag.

And Mach One...

One has to give poor Scootaloo some leeway here. Even at their best, the Crusaders often had the memory and attention spans of mayflies, and of the three Scootaloo was far from being the deepest or heaviest thinker. Like her idol she did have something of a gift for obliviousness... And, after all, she was still a child, with all the peter-pan like forgetfulness and inattentiveness that entails. She had a lifetime of forgotten chores, lectures and homework assignments behind her already.

She had already partially figured all this out, but this little bit of eavesdropping was sealing the deal. She was getting one of those awful, early Monday morning I-forgot-to-do-my-homework-this-weekend-didn't-I epiphanies she was so familiar with. Promises of secrecy or no, Rainbow Dash might have several very important reasons to speak to her one-winged friend. She felt so, so stupid for not connecting all the bits earlier. And now it sounded like him and all the other Fools were gonna be in trouble with the Law... if she didn't jump in and do something first.

Scootaloo bit her lip, undecided. Then she decided to do what she always did; dive in headfirst. She galloped out and up to Rainbow Dash, skidding to a halt. “Rainbow Dash, there's something important I gotta tell you!” she blurted out. She nearly lost her nerve when everypony and griffon turned to stare at her.

“I... I think I can get you the Nobody's Fools.” She took a deep breath. “And the one-winged stallion.”

The grownups all stared at her. “You know who they are?” Gold Star said, his tone growing agitated. “You know where they are?”

The filly gulped and nodded. “I know them,” she said. “I-- I have for a while.”

Gold Star's expression darkened. He opened his mouth and was obviously about to say something, but Rainbow Dash pushed him aside. She seized Scootaloo by the shoulders, grinning. “That's great!” she beamed. “Where are they? Tell us quick, kid!”

Scootaloo looked distressed. She bit her lower lip. “I... I can't,” she said. “Not yet.”

“Not yet, what do you mean not yet?” Gold Star said, his voice starting to rise. “Young filly, they are wanted by the law--”

“For what?” Scootaloo shot back. “They haven't done anything! Sure, they don't like the Mayor or the Watch very much... but they'd never have NOTHING to do with the Crownbreakers either. They think PEARs are a bunch of plotheads!” She pointed a hoof at Gold Star. “And you said it yourself, the most they've ever done is pull some pranks. You can't just drag them off to jail for THAT. They're not bad ponies!”

“Now, nopony's getting dragged off to jail,” Gold Star said, trying to temporize things.

“Yeah, well, tell THEM that,” Scootaloo said. “You and your Watch are always hassling them. Whaddya think they're gonna think if I show up on their doorstep with a bunch of city guards? They'll think I ratted them out!”

“Doorstep? What, they have a hideout someplace?”
“Like I'm telling YOU--” Scootaloo said, flaring her wings angrily.

“Scootaloo--!” Dash groaned and rubbed her aching forehead, just under her aching horn... she realized what she was doing, and what she was feeling. She focused on the feeling, squinting at Scootaloo with unusual scrutiny.

“C'mon, look--” Scootaloo suddenly started fishing around in her saddlebags. She pulled out a plushy; a little panda bear dressed as a ballerina. “One of them made THIS for me,” she said, blushing a bit. “He makes 'em for foals at the orphanage and the hospital. Does that sound like a bunch of terrorists to you?

“I'm supposed to be meeting them later today,” she confessed. “I'll talk to Mach One and the others. Get them to talk to you. They're not bad ponies.” She shuffled. “If I tell them the coolest Princess wants to talk to them, they'll come around. Please. Let me try, at least?”

Rainbow Dash stared for a long minute at her protegé' and her plushy. “Okay, Scootaloo,” Dash said suddenly. “We'll let you handle it.”

“What do you mean--” Gold Star started to say.

“What I just said, Commissioner,” she said sharply. “We'll let Scootaloo go meet with them. Scoots, just talk with them, tell them they're not in any trouble—tell 'em I just wanna speak with them. Once you've talked them into it, call me on your compact. We'll negotiate a meetup from there. Think you can talk them into meeting me?”


“Flattery'll get ya everywhere,” Dash smirked, pushing the bill of Scootaloo's winged cap down over the filly's eyes. “Go on. I'll be waiting for you to ring me on my compact.”

“Got it,” Scootaloo said, pushing her hat back. She tucked Pandarina Ballerina back in her pannier and galloped off, a filly on a mission.

“And tell 'em I ESPECIALLY want to meet with the one-winged guy!” Dash called after her urgently.

“Got it!”

Gold Star glared after the filly. He turned his glower on the Princess. “Would you care to explain, Highness,” he said, “Why I'm going to be sitting around twiddling my hooves waiting for a little filly to give the go-ahead on rounding up these suspects?”

“Are you kidding? The instant you nabbed one of them, the rest would scatter like scalded cats,” Dash snorted. “Her horn glowed briefly, just a brief flicker. “Besides if that one-winged stallion doesn't want you to find him you never will anyway,” she added in an undertone.

“What was that?”

“Forget it,” she said. “Look, she's right; They're just a bunch of pranksters, no matter how bad Mayor Tubby doesn't like them. And from what I hear, they already get hassled by the Watch, so they already don't like you. You start strong-arming them, and none of them would ever speak to us again. We're better off trying to get them in a cooperative mood first.”

Gold Star sighed, his shoulders slumping. “You're right, Princess,” he said reluctantly. “But I can't help wanting to grab them all, drag them downtown and box their ears for all the shenanigans they've
gotten up to in my town.” He sighed again and met her gaze. “All right, we'll do it your way. I'll hold off, let you handle this so that we don't spook them into rabbiting.” He gave Rainbow Dash a cursory bow. “Till later, your Highness,” he said, and left.

In the momentary lull Prince Ajax regarded Dash skeptically. “What exactly did I just witness here?” he said. “Is it common for the rulers of Equestria to put so much trust in a fledgeling?”

Instead of answering, Dash sat down at the edge of the landing and resumed watching the Wonderbolts training. “Tell me, Ajax,” she said. “What do you know about the Elements of Harmony?”

Ajax rubbed a claw under his beak. “A little,” he confessed. “That there are six of them: Honesty, Kindness, Generosity, um...”

“Generosity, Laughter, Loyalty and Magic,” Dash finished. “Well--- Magic is really Friendship, but... you get the idea.” She shrugged her wings. “My Element is Loyalty. And yeah, we used to bear the Elements, but now that we’ve become alicorns we, well we sort of ARE the Elements.” She looked over at him. “I know you don’t get what that means but--- well, since becoming the Alicorn of Loyalty, I've been learning a lot about it.”

“Like?” Ajax asked.

“Like how many kinds there are,” she said. “There's all sorts of little kinds: family, friends, your team, your home town, your favorite hoofball team... but they really all fit into three groups: loyalty to people, loyalty to a group and loyalty to causes. And I can see them. Or feel them. All the loyalties that ponies have to others, like... invisible threads, sort of, reaching out from them. If I work at it, I can tell what they are, and how strong they are. Which ones clash and which ones make each other stronger. I can even look at a pony and see if somepony is loyal to them, whether they know it or not.

“And the thing is, I can tell if the loyalty goes both ways.”

“And your apprentice...” Ajax guessed.

Dash nodded. Even now she could see the bond in her memory; wispy thin threads of lavender trailing away from Scootaloo's heart off into invisibility, a hooffull of wispy thin bonds to unnamed people, braided loosely into a cord of loyalty to a group and threaded through, surprisingly with a hair-thin cord attached to a cause. When they had been talking, Dash had seen it pulse with vigor-- healthy, clean loyalty, not the sickly colors of loyalty misplaced. What's more, she had peered closely and had seen that not all the pulses traveling down the loyalty thread had been one way. “She’s got a strong connection to the Nobody's Fools,” she said. She chuckled. “It happened fast, but the Squirt has always been like that; once something's got her loyalty, she's loyal for life. But what's important is that they already have a strong connection to her.

“They trust her; they consider her one of their own. In fact I'd make a bet that if she needed their help, they’d be in her corner on the spot.” She set her hoof firmly down and stared off into the middle distance. “Scootaloo is right. Bad ponies wouldn't take up with her like this, and she sure wouldn't take up with them.”

“Part of Loyalty is trust. I'm going to trust Scootaloo.”
Chapter 47

Windy City sat upon a high, stony mountain that pierced the clouds with its two rocky peaks. Nearly every surface, level or approximately so, had been built upon—except for one area. While the rest of the mountain was a fairly gradual slope, On the Northern side, from the Scholar's peak down to little more than a third of the mountain's height from the base, was a sheer dropoff, a flat plane of stone as if some titan had taken a slice out of the mountain and carried it away. Ring shaped cloudlets speckled the air the entire height; at the bottom of the cliff, below a blanket of low hanging white, stood a handful of chimneys, steadily puffing out tiny clouds that spiraled up to the turning winds far above.

At the very top of this enormous sheer dropoff was a fenced-in area dotted with signage, out of which jutted a wooden platform that hung out over the sheer drop. On this platform stood a small group of ponies. In the very middle of this group was a tiny orange filly who was severely reconsidering her circumstances. “You want me to WHAT??” she yelled at the others.

The group had been joined by yet another member; Fledge, a young gryphonling. He and his family apparently lived on, and basically owned, the North Face. “It's easy, newbie,” the gryphonling said, raising his voice to be heard over the wind singing through the support beams under them. “You wait for the Jump Guides here—” he pointed to the two uniformed pegasi standing patiently at the corners of the platform. “To give the signal. When they yell 'ready, set, GO,' then you jump!”

“Jump.”

“Yes.”

“Off a cliff??” Scootaloo yelped.

"You said you wanted to do this with us--"

"AND I IMMEDIATELY REGRET THIS DECISION!"

“Oh come on,” Crackerjack shouted, adjusting his helmet. “We paid for the tickets already--”

“What kinduva loony sets up a ticket ride for jumping off a cliff??” Scootaloo demanded to know.

“Well, ponies used to jump off this place all the time,” Wheezer said. He flapped around in his Jump Suit like a foal wearing a fat man suit. “Then some business savvy ponies found out about it....”

“That'd be us,” Fledge said proudly.

“--Set up the platform and the safety gear and the concession stands and stuff and made it a regular tourist attraction.” he coughed. “Of course they had to change the name to something a little more tourist friendly before the business took off.”

“What'd they call it before?” Scootaloo asked.

“Uhhh, Suicide Leap,” Fledge said. He twiddled his talons.

“Oh swell...”

“Beats what they used to call the neighborhood at the BOTTOM of the cliff,” Bananas Foster said with an evil grin.
“What?”

“Chunky Salsa Plaza.”

Scootaloo made a bolt for it; Mach One barely snagged her by the end of her tail. “FOS-terrr...!” he said, giving the banana yellow colt an exasperated glare. “Quit. Scaring. The Newbie. Okay?” Foster shrugged and cackled unapologetically.

“Can we postpone this till later?” Scootaloo said. “Like, never?”

“For crying out loud, you're a pegasus!” Spritz laughed. “You've got wings!”

“Maybe you missed the fact that they DON'T WORK!” Scootaloo yelled back.

“So what? Never held me back,” Mach said. He strutted around her and flared his one good wing... and made sure to flaunt the empty sleeve. He met her gaze eye to eye. “Didn't hold anypony else back in our group.” He nodded at the others; all of them were wearing helmets; those who didn't have wings were wearing the baggy jump-suits the North Face Jump Guides had provided. Even Softy and Wheezer were suited up.... though Softy looked as nervous as Scootaloo felt and Wheezer was dosing up on air-sickness medicine.

“You've all done this before?” Scootaloo said, suspicious. The group nodded. “All of you?” They nodded again. She looked down again. The ground was waaaaaaay down there, just like it was the last time she looked.

“Twenty seconds to jump time,”

Mach stepped up beside her. “Look, we'll jump together,” he said. “all of us at once. We got Spritz and Foster and Fledge... we won't let nothing happen to you.”

“You promise?” Scootaloo said, her nerves making her voice waver just the tiniest bit. Her eyes never moved from the abyss below.


“Word,” Zonk said. Several of the others chimed in.

“Rule number one for our posse,” Mach One said. “No matter what--- Nobody's Fools, Nobody Falls.”

The jitters melted away... at least in part. Scootaloo smiled and nodded, confidence restored.

“Five seconds!”

The Nobody's Fools, and Scootaloo, lined up at the edge of the platform.

“Timing it for the wind,” the Guide said. “Three...two... one... GO!” With a half defiant, half terrified yell, Scootaloo leapt into the void.

The trick to the North Face was, thanks to the shape of the mountain, the regular wind currents and a heck of a lot of Pegasus weather pony magic, every half hour, as regular as clockwork the winds would gather and make a massive updraft.... an updraft powerful enough to lift a pony (one with the right gear--- rental included in the price of the admission ticket) into the air. For five to ten minutes at a time, even a flightless earth pony could float on the wind... almost like flying. Scootaloo plummeted through the air, legs outstretched like she had been coached, wings buzzing frantically. Any second
now the updraft would kick in and she would actually be airborne.

Any second now.

The cliff face was still going by awful fast...

She started to panic. She looked over to Mach One, who was plummeting straight down alongside her, his face expressionless. “Where’s the wind??” she screeched. “There isn’t any wind!!

“Well then, I guess one of us had better learn how to fly really quick,” he shouted back.

“WHAT?? AAAAAAAAAUUUUUGGHH!!!” Just as she began to pinwheel her legs in panic, there was a sound like the moan of a distant freight train. With an almighty whoosh, the wind began to roar up from below. Whooping and yelling, the Nobody's Fools slowed their descent and began to hover riding on the pillar of air. Buoyed up by the wall of wind and by her own thrumming wings, Scootaloo shot back up past Mach One like a cork shooting out of a bottle. “YooOOUUU SUUUuuuuuck” she squallled at him as she dopplered back up into the sky.

Roaring with laughter, Mach One stretched out his wing and spiraled up after her.

Once her heart stopped pounding in her throat, Scootaloo was in Nirvana. She buzzed up, down and around the updraft, swooping and banking and pulling silly aerial stunts, almost like Rainbow Dash... though of course the others were doing almost as well. Even the ground-bound among them were doing backflips, sailing up and down on the updraft. Well, all except for Wheezer and Softy. Wheezer was spiraling steadily down to the ground, looking rather queasy, and poor timid Softy had already pulled his drop-chute (extra purchase, added on to his ticket) and was descending in a slow, straight line, curled up in a ball at the end of his chute cords and his hooves over his eyes. “Don’t mind them,” Mach shouted to her, laughing. “A slow ride down is all they can take when they do this. But they always insist on coming along...”

Scootaloo laughed along. They were still pretty brave to do it anyway, she thought. Mach One circled around her, using his one wing as a sailfin to steer.

Mach rode the wind in closer as she hovered. “C’mon, you’re halfway to really flying now,” he said, suddenly serious. “More than halfway. You got the wingpower, you just gotta control it!”

He was right; here she was, up in the sky. She was so close; she just had to figure out how to stay there.

“Just push the magic out through your wings,” he urged. “Feel the wind, the updrafts and downdrafts--- the air all around you at your wingtips-- CONTROL it, don't just let it happen! It's in your blood, it's in your bones. The sky is a part of you. TELL the air to lift you!”

She could. She could closer her eyes feel it all around her. Not just the torrent of wind holding them all up, but all the little whorls and eddies, every flap of a wing or curl of air current around her in all three dimensions... she strained, trying to push more of her magic out of her wings, to do more than just feel the air, to control it, to make it bear her up.... almost, almost....

She felt the wind dying down. She opened her eyes and realized to her dismay that she was losing altitude. She was still zipping around, circling with the others, but she was losing altitude way faster than she was gaining forward thrust---which every pegasus knew was the aeronautical math formula for 'falling' rather than 'flying'. She expressed her disapproval in the standard fashion:

“aaaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!!”
--- Only to come to a sudden stop in a billowy white cloud. “Wha....?” It took her a moment to surface from the cottony white and get a look around. When she did, she realized that she had come to a halt in a ridiculously thick layer of permanent cloud, netted in place a few dozen feet above the valley floor. All around her the other Fools were popping their heads out of the white like airborne gophers from where they had impacted the cloud cover. That explains why the ticket price included a free cloudwalking spell 'whether needed or not,' she thought. Mach One dropped down and skidded to a halt a few yards away, laughing as the cloudstuff flew up around him. “You JERK!” she said. “Why didn't you tell me there was a cloud safety net??”

“You really didn't know about the safety net? And you STILL jumped?” Foster said, shaking his head. “You're either the craziest or the bravest one of all of us, Scoot.”

“You all SAID you'd done this before,” Scootaloo said. “Considering you're not splattered all over the ground like raspberry jam, I figured there had to be something.” She took a slurp from her paper cup.

The gang had reconvened at the hideout. They were all in a celebratory mood, and on the way back had spent their last few bits on some chips, dip, soda and other party type edibles which they were now lashing their way through. It wasn't a Pinkie Pie party, Scootaloo reflected, but somehow it was... specialer.

In the middle of the festivities, Bananas Foster got up and stood on an upturned crate. “All right, everypony. And zonkey. And gryphon (the heck you doin' here Fledge, I thought you were working? I kid, I kid). Welcome one and all to our fourth whenever-our-bit-jar-tops-off after-jump party!” There was scattered applause. “A good time was had by all--- you should have seen it, Softy- or you would have if you uncovered your eyes this time--”

Everyone gave Softy a good natured laugh and a few teasing pokes. “It's okay, you know we love ya,” Foster said. “And also, we now get to officially welcome our newest inductee into this mob of goobers, geeks and dweebs: SCOOTALOO!”

“Really?” Scootaloo squeaked as the basement room filled with cheers and whistles.

“Really,” Mach One said. He was lying on a pile of old burlap sacks, his forelegs crossed in front of
him, surveying the room. “We don't do the whole 'initiation' thing but, hey, you ran with us, you even did the North Face with us... so we put it to a vote and you're in. If you want that is,” he added as if it were an afterthought.

“I... thank you!” Scootaloo blurted out giddily.

Everypony within reach gave her congratulatory hoofbumps and backslaps. “So, Rookie,” Foster said with a growing grin. “How does it feel knowing EXACTLY what answer you'll have to give your parents?”

“What?” Scootaloo's brow furrowed.

Foster pinched his nose. “If all your friends jumped off a cliff, would YOU jump off a cliff TOO...?” (1) he said in a high nasally voice. Scootaloo blew a raspberry at him. “My. How eloquent.” He sighed dramatically. “And now she's one of us. I know I'll remember her inaugural flight with us...” He stared down at his hooves, eyes bugging comically, and began doing an impersonation of her less than dignified final landing, flapping his wings maniacally and hooves flailing in every direction in a mad tarantella. “YEEEEEEE---”

“Laugh it up Banana Breath,” Scootaloo shouted, throwing popcorn at him. The other Fools were laughing themselves sick; some of them rolling on the floor.

“Ahh, you know we love yah,” Foster teased.

“Seriously, though. Welcome to the club,” Mach said.

“Yeah. We know you said you're only in town for a while and-- you'll be moving on...” Wheezer said. Several faces looked a bit downcast at that. “But wherever you go you're one of us.”

Scootaloo's face puffed up like she was going to cry. She fought it down. “You guys are cool,” she said, rubbing her eyes with her fetlock. She took a deep breath. It was now or never. “Okay, guys? There's some really important stuff I gotta tell you.” The tone of her voice got their attention. The buzz of noise around the basement died down. “You all know I'm from out of town and stuff,” she said. “Well... I sorta work for somepony...”

SEVERAL HOURS EARLIER

“She told you WHAT??” The Mayor shrilled, spittle flying. His personal assistant, a gangly orange unicorn with a mop of badly groomed blonde mane, cringed back behind him, clutching a stack of folders to his chest.

Gold Star wiped his face and sighed. “The Princess' ward, Scootaloo, told us she knew where the Nobody's Fools were. It seems that she knows several of them personally.”

“Then why aren't you out rounding them up???” It was amazing the octaves the portly little politician's voice could reach when he was upset.

"Her Highness Princess Rainbow Dash,” Gold Star said, stressing every syllable of the title, “ordered
us not to. Directly. She wants to take a more diplomatic approach, let her little assistant make the initial overtures and try to gain their trust.”

“Gain their---” the Mayor choked. Gold Star was actually a bit impressed; the Mayor was reaching whole new heights of apoplexy this time. "They're criminals and hoodlums with a rap sheet as long as your foreleg! They're connected to the Crownbreaker terrorists!"

“They're juveniles with a handful of misdemeanors and maybe a couple of moving violations,” Gold Star corrected. “And any connection between them and these Crownbreaker posers is entirely speculative.” Mostly speculation on YOUR part, Mr. Mayor, he added silently. “As the Princess was so conscientious as to point out. There's no call to send a Watch gang to pounce on them, especially if they're willing to cooperate--”

“I'll decide what's called for in this city!” the Mayor hissed, teeth grinding. “Now I'm going to tell you what's going to happen, Commissioner Gold Star. You're going to put a tail on that Rent-a-Princess's little brat assistant, you're going to follow her to wherever those hoodlums are hiding and you are going to send in every Watchpony you have to arrest all of them-- or you are going to find yourself busted back down to handing out parking and loitering tickets on Kessel Run Road!”

“....You work for Princess Rainbow Dash?” Firecracker yelped.

Scootaloo nodded. She was surrounded by staring eyes and slack jaws.

“What, like as crew on her ship or in her entourage or something?” Foster ventured.

“More like.... I'm her personal assistant, and sort of her apprentice,” Scootaloo said sheepishly, sketching a circle on the floor with her hoof.

Spritz spoke for them all. “Whoa,” he breathed.

“Why-- why didn't you tell us?” Presto said, scowling suspiciously. Other members of the group started to look unsettled. Some started to mutter.

“A good question,” Mach One said, getting to his feet. He fluttered his one wing and snapped it to his side. “I'd like to know the answer myself.”

“Because I didn't want you all to freak just like you're doing right now!” Scootaloo snapped. Her expression softened and she pouted a little bit. “You were cool and I was cool and we were all having fun so what did it matter?”

“Look, we can talk about that later, okay?” She pressed on urgently before anypony else could start raising an outcry. “But this right now is kind of important. Rainbow Dash-- I mean Princess Rainbow Dash-- she wants to meet you all.” That got some startled looks.

“Say what?”

“You especially,” she said, pointing at a surprised Mach One. “It's about some real important stuff--and-- well some other real important stuff... I swear you're not in trouble or anything but--” Before
she could finish, there came a tremendous thud from upstairs. The heavy door at the top of the stone stairway that spiraled up the wall of the basement shuddered in its frame. There was another boom and the door blasted open, and a City Watchpony burst in through the door. “FREEZE!” he shouted. Two more shoved in behind him, even as he turned around from his two-hoofed door buck.

“Horseapples!” somepony swore. Crackerjack turned on Scootaloo, his eyes blazing with fury. “She ratted us out!”

“Everypony bail!” Spritz yelled. He and several others made a rush for the secret exit, only to have more guards pour in from that direction. “Oh BUFFALO NARDS!” In desperation he grabbed his rainbow juice paint sprayer and emptied it at the foremost pony.

“Halt! You are under-- Aggkkkgpthh!!” the first Watchpony's warning was gargled out by a mouthful of periwinkle. The one behind him pressed in. Growling and snarling, Bowser ran in underhoof and began snapping at any ankle he could reach. Fledge took the hint and jumped in too, pecking and scratching. A third squeezed in through the door only to suddenly find himself with a faceful of little red angry unicorn. Crackerjack literally climbed up the stallion's peytral and began punching him in the nose for all he was worth.

“You're surrounded, give-- OW!!"

“OwOW OWWW!”

The stairwell was hosting its own little drama. The column of watchponies tromping down the stairs single file found themselves facing a robed and hatted colt. He stood athwart their path, waving a staff in one hoof and a paper bag sitting next to him. “YOU... SHALL NOT.... PAAAASSSS!” Presto yelled theatrically. He dug in the bag and began flinging misshapen little paper packets at the guards by the hooffull. Some of the packets exploded in showers of sparks or in clouds of multi-colored smoke; others went off like cherry bombs underhoof. Still others released rapid-growing vines that tangled the watchponies' legs. The ones in front actually started backing up, bumbling into the ones behind. A pegasus guard made the mistake of leaping down to the main floor; Mach One was there waiting for him, teeth bared and nostrils flaring. He reared up and met him headlong; the stallion and the teenage colt went to the floor in a tangle of thrashing wings and limbs.

But there were already a half dozen watchponies and still more pushing their way in. The Fools' last heroic stand came to an end when four unicorns entered, two at the stairwell and two at the back entrance, and cast an entrapping spell over the entire basement. Every fighting colt, gryphon and zonkey froze in place, trapped in the magic like amber.

Presto's magic smoke dissipated; the guards on the stair kicked the dead shriveled vines off their legs and tromped down to the main floor. The ones at the back way set their petrified fight partners none too gently on the floor. Grumbling and cursing they began tying ropes around forelegs and wings and pushing magic restrainers down over horns, ignoring the shouting and swearing from their immobile prisoners.

Once they had every pony trussed up like a turkey, the unicorns let the magic dissipate. For whatever reason-- probably because she had remained frozen in shock and hadn't moved from where she stood-- Scootaloo had not been restrained. The minute she could move again she ran up to the impassive watchponies. “What are you idiots DOING??” she screeched at them.

“A bang up job, from the look of it,” said a smug voice at the top of the stairs. There stood the Mayor, his ever-present assistant in tow; next to him stood the Commissioner, looking very displeased with things; next to him stood an old pony in coveralls with a ball cap and a floor-brush mustache. A couple of ponies wearing press passes in their hats crowded in behind. Flashbulbs
popped.

The brush-mustached pony looked at the other two in disgust. “I told you idiots I had a key,” he said. He looked down where Mach One was lying, bound wing and hoof, and his expression turned to regret. “I'm sorry, boy,” he said, “But they showed up out of the blue...”

“It's okay, Brushy,” Mach One said sadly. “It's not like a janitor could say 'no' to the City Watch.”

“Well, well, well,” the Mayor gloated. “I've finally caught you all. You all had your fun, but now it's time to pay the piper...”

“What are you DOING?” Scootaloo repeated herself at the top of her lungs.

“Rounding up the single biggest gang of juvenile delinquents in the city,” the Mayor said. He looked around at the painted walls and gave a cursory kick at the Nobody's Fool logo on one of the murals. “And a bunch of would-be little terrorists.” He looked over at her and his tone shifted to condescending. “We're sorry, but we couldn't go through with your plan. Things were happening too quickly. Thank you all the same though, Miss Scootaloo.” There was a calculating gleam in his eye. He spoke loudly enough for every one of the Fools to hear him. “We couldn't have done it without your help--”

She stared at him, jaw hanging in disbelief.

He took a glance around at the expressions curdling into rage, looked her square in the eye and smirked.

And that's when she bit him.

---

1. *Dear parents, if you are tempted to use the old retort "if everyone else jumped off a cliff...“ Don't. Suppose you were up on a cliff surrounded by all your family, friends and relations and they suddenly all jumped off. Which is the more likely explanation: that everyone except you spontaneously turned both stupid and suicidal... or they all knew something you don't?  Blind iconoclasm is just as stupid as being a blind follower. Dear Kids: The obvious answer is "Sure, seeing as they've all jumped TWICE."
While Scootaloo had been out and about, Rainbow Dash had been busy as well; as soon as the last cold rehearsal was done, she put the Wonderbolts in charge of moving everything to the freshly finished Thunderdome and setting up for the show that evening. Spitfire and the crew immediately flew the Thunderstreak over and began the long process of unloading and setting up of all the lighting, gear, costumes and props.

Dash herself though had another more important appointment. The moment she'd handed off her last memo, she had beelined to another part of town for her scheduled appointment at one of Windy City’s three hospitals.

The Windy City Flightless Foal's Clinic.

It wasn't a large institution; it was actually rather small and antiquated, compared to the facilities in places like Manehattan or Phillydelphia. (The name went back to a time when Windy City was almost entirely a pegasus-only town.) It only had twenty or so patients at any time. And much of the more advanced medical research was taking place elsewhere. But it was still an iconic institution in the region; it still clung to a reputation for work with the physically disadvantaged. So pretty much every handicapped child in the city--- pony, donkey, gryphon, thestral, zebra or other--- found their way there at one point or another.

It didn't take her long to decide that visiting was both the best, and the worst thing that had happened to Dash since she'd become a Princess. The moment she had entered the clinic she had been all but mobbed by gleeful children of every species-- flying or non. The smiles on their faces at being visited by a Princess of Equestria... “A real live Princess!!”... accompanied by a quartet of Wonderbolts would buoy her spirit for days afterward. And the sight of so many colts, fillies, and cubs with deformed or missing limbs, trapped in braces, or confined to wheelchairs would break her heart every time she remembered it.

After spending an hour or two with the children, she sprang her surprise: All the children would be going on a special field trip today.... to the opening of the new Wonderbolts show! They would all have seats in a special section just for them, right in the Royal box, and get to see the whole show for free. There would even be popcorn and cotton candy! This went over about like she'd expected; prior to the announcement they'd just thought she was awesome. Now, they thought she'd hung the sun and moon.

The caregivers had dispersed the gleeful children, taking them back to their rooms to prepare for their outing. Once the last foal had given her a final heart-melting hug and galloped off, Dash had gotten down to the more serious business she had come here for. She trotted over to the receptionist.

“Excuse me, is Doctor Hospice Care in?” she asked. “I had an appointment to speak to him...”

“He's in a meeting with the administrators, your Highness,” the mare behind the counter said, dipping into a nervous little curtsey. “I can go in and fetch him if you like--”

Dash waved her off. “Nah, nah, I'll wait,” she said. “And cut it out with the bowing and stuff, okay? It just makes me feel weird.” She stood there for a few minutes, leaning against the counter and tapping her hoof idly as she stared off in the middle distance, completely oblivious to how she was making the poor receptionist increasingly nervous with her presence. Nice building, she thought. Very old and, what's the word, genteel? Lots of paintings and curly armed furniture, very “old money.” Hmmm. Her hoof tapped in time with the ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner.
A throat cleared nervously behind her. “Your Highness,” the receptionist said meekly. “Perhaps you’d like to peek in? They’re just down the hall, second door on the left—” she pointed.

Dash sighed in relief. “Yeah, thanks--- this waiting thing really isn’t working for me....” she flapped down the hallway and landed outside the door. She almost barged in, but at the last moment she remembered herself... some of those etiquette lessons her staff kept trying to hammer in her head were sticking, anyway.... and hesitated. The door was cracked open; she decided to listen to see if they were wrapping up. She peeked in.

Well, somepony was wrapping up. There were four ponies sitting at a meeting table, three on one side, one on the other. The three ponies had doctor's coats, but something about them made Dash think that they looked more like business ponies. The mare in the middle of the two stallions was speaking. “...The fact remains, Doctor Hospice, that your handling of patient cases does not.... does not correspond with the caregiving philosophy of this institution,” she said.

The unicorn stallion on the other side of the table looked way more like a doctor. He was white with a silver mane and goatee, and his doctor's coat was creased and rumpled like someone worked in it. He had a stethoscope around his neck and on his flank, and a pair of half-moon spectacles on his muzzle. He was also grinding his teeth. “I thought the philosophy of this institution,” he said slowly, “was to heal.”

One of the business stallions sighed and shook his head in a longsuffering manner, as if he were dealing with a particularly stubborn child. “Doctor Hospice, for over a hundred years we have provided treatment to handicapped children of every race. That is our mission statement.”

“But that is precisely the problem,” Hospice said. “You've got a philosophy of 'treating the children,' but no pony here has a dedication to treating the children's condition. Summer Day could be out of his wheelchair, at least walking in braces, with the newer therapy methods. And Spring Shower, there are new medicines up for pony testing right now that could get her feathers growing in properly. I could improve the condition of half the children here at the least if we pursued remedial treatments has been ignored or even obstructed—”

“Because it's not helpful, Hospice,” the stallion on the left, a stodgy balding orange pegasus, said. “We determined ages ago that the best approach for dealing with children who are permanently handicapped is to give them psychiatric counseling...”

“To accept their fate?” Hospice said. “Is that what you mean? Is that what you want me to do to 'treat' these children? To tell these children to give up, that there's no hope?”

The tweedy blue stallion on the mare's right spoke up. “Dr. Hospice, anything else is cruel!” he said. “You're making these crippled children cling to hope like a crutch!”

There was a long pause. Hospice's glare was so cold the desk-pony's fur should have frosted. “I'll just let you sit there and contemplate how stupid what you just said actually is,” he said in a voice as flat as a tundra. The tweedy pony at least had the grace to look sheepish.

The mare spoke again. “Dr. Hospice, To help them accept their condition, and embrace their place in the handicapped community-- your approach is hurting their self esteem. And word is getting out, too. You're starting to offend the handicapped community in Windy City...”

“THEY DON'T NEED A COMMUNITY, THEY NEED HEALING!!” Hospice roared, slamming his forehooves down on the table so hard that it jumped off the floor. “And they HAVE a community... Equestria! Not some clique of college-student victimhood enablers--”
"That will be quite enough," the mare snapped. Hospice bit off his words and glared down at the table. The mare continued in an emotionless voice. "Doctor Hospice, your impartiality has been compromised by how close you are to some of these children. You cannot keep advocating extreme, foolishly heroic efforts--"

"Advising ponies to pursue the newest medical breakthroughs is not 'foolishly heroic', Doctor Catheter," Doctor Hospice growled stubbornly.

"--Advocating foolishly heroic efforts," she continued firmly, talking over him. "You are only upsetting the parents and making it more difficult for the children to accept their situation. You may mean well, but you don't know when to quit." She almost sounded sympathetic.

"The discussion is moot, anyway. We and the other senior members have decided to turn down your request for implementation of the new physical and thaumaturgical regimens suggested by our colleagues from Our Lady of Sunrise Hospital. Their work is... innovative. But much of it is just obvious showboating, stuff done to make a quick flash in the medical publications and with their financiers. And that sort of thing... isn't in the best interests of the Clinic.

She and the other two got to their hooves. "We're going to make this request only once, Doctor. Stick to the approved treatments and therapy, and stop... filling your patients' heads with nonsense." As one they turned and marched single-file out of the room, only stopping briefly in startlement to bow to the Princess waiting outside the door.

Once they were gone she quietly edged inside. "Doctor Hospice?"

Hospice was still sitting at the table, staring at it's surface like he could see the future in the wood grain. "Your Highness," he said without looking up. "Welcome back."

Dash shrugged over her shoulder. "That last bit there was rough," she said. She cocked an eyebrow and waited for him to fill in the details.

"It's the.... new medical philosophy that's taking hold," he sighed. "Spearheaded by some of our local crop of Ivory Tower intellectuals, career students and Liberal Arts ninnies. A whole activist group dedicated to 'protecting the handicapped community.' Except their idea of 'protecting...' " He stopped and thumped his hoof on the table. "They don't want to cure physical handicaps or treat them-- they want to normalize them."

"Normalize?" Dash said.

"It's an idea taking hold in a lot of fields, Princess," he said, getting to his feet. "Psychology, psychiatry, health and nutrition, physical and mental disability... You can't tell a fat pony they're fat, that's 'fat shaming.' You can't say that a retarded pony is retarded, that's 'prejudice against the mentally challenged.' Crazy ponies aren't crazy, they're 'differently sane.' " He snorted. "You can't try and help the lame to walk or the flightless to take wing, because you're 'taking away their cultural identity. ' That would make them feel bad."

"What they really mean is that it would take away their victimhood," he growled. "Instead of being perpetual victims, victims that the self-anointed compassionate can drown in crocodile tears to make themselves feel noble, they'd be ponies battling to overcome an illness. They might even be whole someday, perfectly healthy and normal ponies. And the self-anointed can't have that. They don't want to help others, they just want someone they can slobber all over.

"Do you know what Body Integrity Identity Disorder is, your Highness?" he went on. "It's a mental illness, one that's on the rise all thanks to this 'enlightened' outlook. It's where someone who is..."
perfectly healthy is obsessed with becoming blind, or deaf, or an amputee. So much so that they'll mutilate themselves, to try and feel 'complete.' That's how addicted some ponies are to the privileges of being a victim, how deluded they are into thinking that being crippled will make them special."

“Is this... really a thing?” Dash asked, disbelieving.

“...I once had a patient, a young mare who was so fixated and obsessed with blindness, with being 'special' by being blind, that she poured bleach in her own eyes to make herself 'complete.’” Dash shuddered, horrified. “Well, she got her wish. Incurably blind. Surprise, surprise.

“I had another patient. Son of two deaf ponies, he was hearing impaired too, but not so much that a hearing aid gemstone wouldn't fix it. It's not even outpatient surgery to implant them... he could have had full hearing in a single day. But his parents refused to let him get the implants because he wouldn't be part of their deaf community anymore, they said. He's an adult now, but he still refuses to get the implants because of the brainwashing his parents gave him. He basically inherited BIID from his parents-- He thinks he'll be 'incomplete' if he lets the doctors make him whole.

“Tell me, Princess: is there any real, practical difference between the end result of those two stories?”

“We used to understand that if something was broken, you fixed it,” he said, his tone becoming bewildered. “You didn't take it and tell it how wonderful it was to be broken. When did that start becoming sane?”

Dash didn't know what to say.

He took a long, cleansing breath. “But...forgive me, Princess,” he said with a sad smile. “You're not here to talk about my on-the-job difficulties. I assume you want to hear about the test results.”

“Yeah, got it in one,” Dash said. Two or three days prior, Dash had brought Doctor Hospice aboard the Thunderstreak and had him give Scootaloo a full medical exam. Dash had told Scootaloo that it was 'just a checkup, like the Wonderbolts have every year...' a fiction that the Doctor and the Wonderbolts both helped her sustain. The truth was that Dash had been doing some heavy-duty research into pegasus physicians, especially those who dealt with flight disabilities. Her digging had revealed that Doctor Hospice Care was one of the most highly recommended doctors in the field and had been for decades. The instant she had his name and found out he was in the city, she'd all but dragged him aboard to diagnose Scootaloo. He'd run a battery of tests on the filly, taken some samples of blood and feathers, and had left, informing Dash that he'd have the results in a day or two. If he couldn't figure out how to help Scootaloo--

No. She would not think that way. He'd figure it out. He was literally the best of the best.

“Well if you'll follow me...” he said, leaving the room. Dash followed him down the hall to his office, where he dug a manila folder out of a filing cabinet and magically spread it out in the air for them both to read. “Okay, the good news first: Scootaloo's muscle, bone, and feather structure are all normal,” he said. “Wings are a hair undersized, but wing size, contrary to folklore, has little to do with flight ability.”

“I know,” Dash said, thinking of Snowflake, the sergeant in Fluttershy's Guard, and rolling her eyes. The sight of THAT pony flying around, on wings smaller than Scootaloo's, had put Scootaloo in a funk for days...

“And her wingpower--- good night, you saw it, she dragged the testing table halfway across the floor and me along with it!” He laughed ruefully. “Basically, we can eliminate ninety percent of the
known physical causes for flight impediment, and pretty much all of the truly serious ones.”

“Aaaaand the bad news?”

By way of answer he pointed to a particular false-color photograph of the filly in question. It was a profile view and showed bands of color over her body and surrounding her in the air. “That means we've narrowed it down to her thumatic flow,” he said. “That's... trickier.

“Her overall magical current is good-- she can push enough magic out through her wings to propel herself forward. And quite powerfully, too. See my previous comment about her wingpower test. See also my bruises and sprained gaskin.” Dash snorted in amusement. “But somehow she is incapable of turning any of that thrust into lift.”

“You see, part of a pegasus' natural ability is the ability to feel the air with their magic;” he went on.

“Yeah, I kinda know that, Doc,” Dash said. She flapped one wing, amused.

“Ah, of course you would,” Hospice conceded politely. “But in order to control the air around them the proprioception of their magic field has to be functional.”

“Pro-what?”

“How do I put this? It's the sense that lets you tell where your own limbs are, how they're positioned. Ever had to touch your wingtip to your nose with your eyes closed? You could do that because you could feel where both your nose and your wingtips were, from the inside. You do the same thing with your magic field; you can feel it, and feel with it... which lets you control what it does to the air it touches. But Scootaloo, for some reason, her magical sense of touch is... blocked or impaired.”

“Like if your leg falls asleep,” Dash provided. “You can still stand on it and walk on it, but you're all wobbly because you can't feel your leg, or the ground you're standing on. It's all numb.”

“Exactly. Scootaloo can't fly because her magic field is 'numb.' She can't tell what it's doing, at least not fully. Oh, she has enough control that she can propel herself, and her cloudwalking is naturally automatic, but the complexities of flight are too much for her to handle.”

“So how do we fix it?” Dash said, pressing.

“That's where it gets difficult,” Doctor Hospice said with a frown. “This sort of problem is fairly rare, and it can be... very difficult to nail down. Rare neural conditions, brain damage--”

“Brain damage ??”

“Not very likely in this case, I assure you,” Hospice soothed. “I did examine her after all--- No concussions or signs of head trauma. She has a fairly tough little noggin.” He gave a rueful smile.“But it does happen. Cases of pegasi getting a concussion, being perfectly fine otherwise... but for some reason their ability to fly is impaired or even... shut off, like a light switch, only for it to suddenly return without explanation. There's even cases of hysterical paralysis: the patient suffers some terrible emotional trauma and their mind reacts by rendering them deaf, mute, lame, blind. Or unable to fly. Mind, not afraid or unwilling to fly... literally unable, as if their wings had been paralyzed or their magic had been somehow severed. Only when they have a breakthrough about their trauma do they regain function.”

“So this could be all in her head?” Dash said. This was becoming frustrating!

“That is where the brain is located,” Hospice snarked. He immediately became apologetic again.
“Sorry. It's just that so many ponies get so glib about problems with the mind and brain, or problems between the brain and body...”

“Yeah, I get it.” Dash ran a hoof through her mane, embarrassed. “Just because it's in your head doesn't mean it's not real.”

“Exactly. In this case,... it could be any one of a dozen difficult-to-diagnose problems, physical, psychological or even somewhere in between. It would take months, or even years of testing and therapy, and even then we might never nail down exactly what the problem is much less fix it.” He seemed to age years. “I'm sorry, your Highness.”

“What? Hey, don't be!” Dash said, deliberately projecting confidence. “I mean hey, you narrowed it down, that's more than all the eggheads before you accomplished combined! I mean, it'd be great if she could just take a pill or something and fix it,... but at least now that we know where to look for a solution. We'll have Scootaloo's flying problem licked in no time.”

He smiled at her as he magically shuffled the contents of Scootaloo's folder back together. “So you intend to pursue treatment? Our clinic does recommend you ought to focus on... transitioning Scootaloo into her life as a physically challenged pony, instead.” His sarcasm was tart as a peeled lemon.

“Buck that and pluck that,” Dash snorted. “Look, I get that... that victims of an illness need to come together to help each other overcome their problem, you know? But this whole “accepting” thing? ...Maybe I'm wrong. But it's just not my gig. And I'm not gonna apologize for that.”

Doctor Hospice gave her a wry smile and a cocked eyebrow. “In that case, your Highness, unfortunately I have to tell you that I do not know of pony physicians who might help with this matter.” He locked eyes with her and his horn glowed; a pencil and a piece of paper levitated over to the table behind him and began writing. “I cannot recommend several magical therapy clinics in Manehattan, and it is strictly against clinic policy to suggest you get Scootaloo regular counseling for possible psychological roots to the problem-- there are certainly no names on this paper of therapists who would be willing to work personally with you-- and I'm terribly sorry but I cannot write out a recommendation to my colleagues---” another paper levitated over and the quill kept writing--” or any suggestions for possible courses of therapy... I am sorry but,” he shrugged as the papers floated over to her, “my hooves are hobbled.” His eyes twinkled with mischief. “I wish you luck.”

Dash snickered. “I like your style, Doc,” she said as she took the paper in her wing. “Why do you work out here, if you're butting heads with these buttheads?”

He sighed. “I used to work in the Manehattan hospitals, but I wanted to specialize in helping the physically disabled. And back in the day, all the work in physical disabilities was here in Windy City.”

“So what happened?”

He grimaced. “I got here... but the college activists got here first.”

*Gingle ingle ingle.*

Dash looked down at her collarbone. “The heck? Oh yeah. Scuse me, doc.” She plucked her compact out of its setting. Like the rest of them, when the Tree had reclaimed the Elements, she had taken the peytral/necklace left behind and had a jeweler reshape the empty setting to hold her compact. She carried it around so much she practically forgot it was there. She popped it out of the setting and flipped it open. “Yello-- oh, hey Squirt! How'd the thing with the Fools go?”
Scootaloo's face appeared in the mirror and her voice, high and tinny, came out. “Dash, it's me! Scootaloo! You're not going to believe what the mayor did...!”

... “He WHAT?” Dash roared. Eyes blazing she spun around. Where was Harshwhinny? She'd made herself scarce the moment they'd arrived-- “HARSHWHINNY! Where--”

“Your Highness?” Harshwhinny's voice came from behind her.

“YAAGH!” Dash yelped. She spun around with her wings flared. Harshwhinny stood there, not moving an inch, save for her eyebrow arching upward. Dash scowled. “Man, I oughta hang a bell on you,” Dash grumbled. She held up her compact. “Harshwhinny, did you hear--?”

“Mayor ignored you, sent out the goon squads, rounded up the Nobody's Fools and dragged them down to Watch headquarters and is having them AND your protege' booked on every charge he can think up,” Harshwhinny summed up in her caustic drawl. “I believe those were the high points?”

Dash paced in a tight circle, snarling and grinding her teeth and gritting out words so bitten off they were barely syllables. “That-- I-- he-- wha-- who-- NEV--rrrAARRrrgh!”

“I feel obligated to remind your Highness that flying over there and ripping the Mayor's head off with your bare hooves would negatively impact your public opinion ratings,” Harshwhinny droned. Her lip curled. “Well. At least among ponies who don't know the mayor personally, one suspects.”

“Right, right, gotta do the Princess thing,” Dash growled, her mane and tail frizzing. “Killing ponies bad, even if make Dash happy.” She re-opened her compact, planning to have Scootaloo hand off the compact to someone in charge... then closed it. “No. I don't want him to see this coming.” she said. She thought a minute then opened the compact. “Scootaloo? Sit tight, help is on the way. No, it's cool, I'm not mad at you. I promise. Harshwhinny?”

“Yes, your Highness?”

“...Sic 'em.”

It was a dismal scene at the University Peak Precinct. Unsurprising, because nopony there was particularly happy. The Nobody's Fools had been cuffed, wing-bound, horn-ringed, brought in on a paddy wagon and dumped unceremoniously in the lobby to wait, as they had been informed with great relish by a sadistically seething and slightly bleeding Mayor, to be interrogated and booked. They were lined up on a hard wooden bench along the wall waiting their turn; some were sulking, some were seething (or in Crackerjack's case muttering dire threats should he ever get his cuffs or horn ring off), some were in dread or even outright despair.

The watchponies who were processing them weren't in particularly cheery moods themselves. Quite a few were nursing bruises, and even minor burns. Oddly enough, though some were a little heavy-hoofed in their handling of the Fools, the general attitude among them was that the Mayor and to a lesser degree the Commissioner were more to blame for their discomfort. Crash-raiding a bunch of kids in their clubhouse because the Mayor was in a snit did not sit well with the average watchpony.

Many of the Fools were all but in tears. The Mayor had clapped eyes on Presto's laboratory and
Softy's work shop and had flipped his freaking lid. He'd started screeching about “drug and explosive labs” and “smuggling dolls” and had the Watch confiscate everything. They'd confiscated Spritz's paints, Zonk's toolkit, Bowser's flower pots, even poor Wheezy's inhaler and allergy pills... pretty much everything in the Fool's basement hideout that wasn't nailed down.

They had thrown everything in boxes, dragged it back to the precinct house where it was all meticulously disassembled and examined-- or in layman's terms, they destroyed everything and sifted through the pieces for incriminating evidence. The Nobody's Fools were forced to watch as their beloved possessions were methodically violated in the name of the law. Potion ingredients were dumped out and sifted; plants were dumped out of their pots; even poor Softy's plush toys were ripped open at the seams and turned inside out in the quest for something incriminating.

“--There's nothing there,” the pony in charge of examining the “evidence” said in annoyance to the Mayor. “This stuff is just what it looks like; harmless, perfectly legal junk.”

“Heyy,” said one of the colts. He was ignored.

“Oh don't give me that! Look at this-- chemicals, drug paraphernalia--” the Mayor sputtered.

“That's bog-standard chemistry set glassware,” the forensic pony growled. “And over-the-counter materials and chemicals. You can buy that stuff at any corner alchemy shop. It's perfectly legal to own in these quantities, even with all the safety ordinances you passed, Mayor.” As the Mayor ground his teeth, the forensic pony continued. “Likewise the rest of it. The paints are mixes of rainbow juice-- they wash off with water. So forget accusing them of vandalism.” He winced as he recalled the little grey pony's wail of despair when the janitor, under orders from the staff, came in and started sloshing soapy water over the murals covering the walls. “The tools you could find in any sports shop. The dolls had nothing inside them but stuffing. And you're going to have to push through a lot more nitpicking ordinances before skateboards and rollerskates are completely illegal to own. Sir.”

The Mayor fumed. “Don't give me any of your backtalk, ” he said, jamming his bandaged hoof under the watchpony's nose. “They're miscreants and troublemakers and we caught them trespassing on private Academy property with a stockpile of potential pranking paraphernalia. That's more than enough for any judge to send them to juvie hall all by itself!”

“Sure, when the judge is your cousin,” someone muttered.

The mayor's head whipped around. “Who said that??” Nopony fessed up, of course.

Then things started REALLY going downhill; the parents arrived. Despite their stubbornness, the watch had managed to squeeze the identities and personal information out of several of them, and take targeted guesses at the rest. In short order several of the Fools were now dealing with at least one parent distraught at being summoned by the Law, or with the dread of waiting for their own parental unit to appear through the front door.

The first to arrive was a coal black earth stallion with a dark red mane and a pickaxe cutie mark. Contrary to expectations, he was not a miner. He was a road crew worker. But, on a rocky mountain like Windy City, road work involved a lot of quarrying. He was an enormous pony, easily as large as Big Macintosh, with a heavy jaw and more than a few nicks and scars on his hide.

He paid little heed to the chatter of the watchponies around him and plodded with heavy tread to where Crackerjack sat sulking. The unicorn colt was looking a bit rumpled and bruised, and had fetters on all four hooves, a ring on his horn and was attached by a chain to the leg of the bench he was sitting on. The stallion raised an eyebrow at the rather excessive restraints on the pint-sized colt,
but said nothing.

Crackerjack saw the shadow of his father cover him. He looked up, all his fighting temper gone. “Hi, Dad,” he said, cowed.

“Boy,” His father said, noncommittally. There was no tone to his voice, just an acknowledgement. “What you in for, boy?”

Crackerjack shrugged meekly. “I think they're trying to decide what to charge us with,” he said.

Jackhammer-- because that was his name-- looked over at the watch pony next to him. “What's with the cuffs and chains?”

The pony in question replied stiffly. “When we conducted the raid on their hideout, he resisted arrest and physically assaulted several officers,” he said.

Jackhammer raised an eyebrow again. He also took note that the watch pony in question was sporting a black eye, a bandage over his muzzle and that his speech was muffled from a swollen jaw. “Is that how it works, now,” he said coolly. “Break down a man's door, attack him and then yell 'stop resisting!' while you beat him down.” He looked at Crackerjack. “This your work, boy?” he said, tipping his head at the pony's battered face.

Crackerjack gave him and the watchpony a sidelong glance. “Uh, yeah, kinda.” He was visibly struggling to keep a straight face.

Jackhammer looked the watchpony in the eye. “Bet that usually works out way better for you, don't it,” he said coolly, giving the pony's nose a none too gentle poke. The watchpony winced and stepped back, then glared at Jackhammer while he rubbed his nose, growling. “Now git a key and git those things offa my boy.” The watchpony started to say something, but picked up on the growling bass in the massive earth pony's voice and wisely reconsidered. He got out a key, removed the hobbles and horn-ring, and skedaddled.

Jackhammer sat down next to his son. “These the ponies you hang out with?” he said, indicating the other Fools on the bench.

“Yup,” Crackerjack nodded without looking up.

Jackhammer mulled that over. “Wouldn't y' rather hang out with other unicorns, doin'... unicorn stuff?” he said. His tone was surprisingly cautious for one so large. “That's Why your ma and I put you in that magical primary school the Academy runs.”

The look his son gave him was incredulous. “And what are 'unicorn things,' Dad?” he asked scornfully. “I just hang out with these guys because I like them, and they like me. And we all do stuff that we LIKE, not just the stuff we're supposed to. That's what I like about them. With them, it don't matter what you are.”

“I can see that,” his father said, taking note of the motley crew lining the wall.

“They don't think I'm too weak or puny or, or unicorny to be a fighter,” Crackerjack muttered under his breath.

Jackhammer heard him. He winced, and was about to protest that Crackerjack was still too young, and just too small... then he caught another glimpse of that watchpony with the bandaged nose. The silence stretched on for a minute; he stuck his jaw out as he ruminated what he'd heard and seen. “Seems like you're liable to get in a lot o' scrappin', hanging out with this lot,” he finally said.
Crackerjack looked unhappy, but he nodded.

"Seems to me you need to learn a little discipline about that sort o' thing." Crackerjack cringed, looking up at his father with a face full of woe.

"There's a fancy fighting school, a do-jo, or whatever...run by a minotaur...just downhill of here," he finally said. “Might do you a world o' good.”

Crackerjack's face lit up with hope like the sun.

Over at one of the desks, a zebra in a watch uniform was typing in the information on a certain zonkey in handcuffs. “Name?”

“Uh, Zonk.”

“Real name, kid,” the zebra said sarcastically.

Zonk sighed, rolled his eyes fatalistically, and recited a series of liquid-sounding syllables.

The zebra paused in his typing and gave him an unamused glare. “I bet you think that's funny, kid,” he said.

“No, but my father thought it was hysterical,” Zonk riposted dryly. “My mother, on the other hand, thought it was a name.”

The zebra thought it over. “Ah. One of those.” He resumed typing.

Foster had no warning. One minute he was being led over to a desk for processing or booking or whatever they called it, and he was suddenly struck amidships by a middle aged pegasus mare who began sobbing over him hysterically. “Oh Foster, Foster, where have you BEEN?” she wailed. “What happened to you??”

“Mom??” he gasped. “Mom, no, I'm fine--” Banana crème simply sobbed and clutched him tighter. Oh no, he thought. He looked around; yep, it was bad as he expected and getting worse. Here came his dad, Banana Bread, his grandfather Banana Supreme, his grandmother Banana Liqueur, his uncle Banana Smoothie-- even his baby sister Banana Pudding was here. Augh! They mobbed him, shouting questions and imprecations.

“--Where have you been?--”
"--Arrested! When we heard--"

"--when you vanished. Your professors had no idea--"

"Wow! Are you gonna go to JAIL, Foster?" This last one cut through the hubbub like a thrown war axe. It came from a tiny yellow pegasus filly with freckles, a gap in her front teeth, A honey-colored mane tied up into two enormous pom pom ponytails, and a look of absolute adoration in her big blue eyes. She sounded as if being hauled off to prison was the most awesome idea ever. "Didja rob a bank?" she asked eagerly.

Foster ignored the rest of his family--- it was easy to do, they were all standing there gaping in horror at the filly's artless outburst-- and knelt down to look his little sister in the eye. "No, Nanner Puddin', I didn't rob a bank," he chuckled.

"Awww." She stuck out her lower lip as her sugarplum visions of gunfire and mayhem and daring daylight robberies were burst like a bubble.

"And no, I'm not going to jail either," he added. I hope. "Mayor Tubbyguts just wants to pick on me and my friends."

"Nanner" stuck out her tongue at the absent Mayor. "The big Doodyhead," she said.

Foster's smile got wider. "Missed you, Boogerface," he said to his favorite little sister.

She jumped forward and threw her forelimbs around his neck in a hug. "Missed you too, Boogerbrain."

It was then that the family matriarch Banana Liqueur resumed the assault. She came striding in, closing range like a man-of-war under full sail, and launched her first full broadside. "Is this what you've come to, Bananas Foster?" She said, her voice ringing off the walls. Every pony in the building surely could hear what she was saying-- which he was sure was her intention. "You abandon your education at the Academy... not even dropping out properly, one day you just disappear! And now we find you've spent this last year or more running around with these vagrant criminal hooligans-- The shame you've brought on the name Bananas by your actions, I--"

"Mother, enough," Banana Bread said wearily. "Son... why did you run off like that?"

"I didn't RUN OFF," Foster said, embarrassed at the floor show his family was putting on.... and more at the way all his friends were gawking as they eavesdropped. "I broke off contact. There's a subtle difference."

"But why? Why would you give up all the opportunities of the Academy? A first rate education, a diploma that would open all sorts of doors, all those powerful and influential ponies you could have connected with..." Liqueur butted in again.

"BECAUSE THEY WERE WANKERS, GRANDMA!" Foster yelled. "All of them! The students were either trust fund foals with silver horseshoes up their butt who looked down on everyone, or dreadlock-maned ninnies who had a new stupid "cause" to protest every three days. And the professors were even worse! They were either slave drivers, or senile old locoweed-munchers who thought they were still fighting "the man" in their sixties." Due to his parents putting him in the business management end of the pool, of course, he had gotten most of the former in both cases.

"And besides... I was flunking out." He looked away. The confession hurt more than he'd expected.

"Flunking out??" His uncle huffed. "Well if you'd just applied yourself, it--"
"I DID, I DID!" He yelled in frustration. "But take a look at my hip, already!" He stood up and waved his cutie mark—a banana peel and a fizzing cartoon bomb—in their faces. "Does that say 'business mega-mogul' to you? Are those bit coins or money symbols? NO! I'm a comedian! But you wouldn't believe me when I told you that! From the time I was a foal, you force-fed me the whole idea of a Banana Family Empire, that I was the heir to the throne, and I had to be ready. You also force fed me my weight in bananas, too. Banana mush when I was a baby. Bananas in my cereal. Banana cake for my birthday. Sun Dried Banana Flakes.... If my mouth was open you stuffed a banana in it. Wouldn't do for the heir to the Chiquita Archipelago Banana Fortune to be seen *not eating a banana would it?*

You wouldn't let me take acting or performing courses, or join the acting club at school, or anything actually to do with my special talent. You forced me to take business classes, and management classes, and accounting—*accounting,* sweet Celestia, why not just poison me in my sleep? You made me join the Young Business Tycoon's Club, and sent me off to Entrepreneur's Summer Camp. Whoa, what a summer that was! 'Yay, kids, let's all gather round the campfire and learn how to do a Power Point Presentation!'

"---And I sucked at all of it! I was so bad at business I had to declare bankruptcy on my first lemonade stand! The bank foreclosed on my Daring Do Adventure Land Treehouse! I was the first twelve year old to be audited by the Equestrian Revenue service!

"I got to college on this stupid 'early start' program you stuffed me into and it was the same thing. YOU picked my major; business major, of COURSE. That was the deal—business major or nothin'. And in *six months* I crashed and burned. In ALL the courses. Do you get it yet? Crash. And. BURN. I went down in *flames*—AIEEE, This is it, we're goin' down, Mayday, Mayday, ARRRGH KAWHOOM Oh the horror NO SURVIVOOOORRRRS!!" He pantomimed a panicking helmsman guiding a flaming zeppelin to its final doom.

"So, I just... snapped one day. Got up in the middle of my accounting class, walked out of the classroom, walked out of the building, walked out of the campus and kept. WALKING." He bugged his eyes out at them.

"Mach One was a friend of mine. He found me wandering around Scholar's Peak like a zompony. He and the Nobody's Fools took me in, let me crash at their place while my brain re-wound itself. Yeah, I was sleeping in a basement on a stack of cardboard boxes. And you know what? My life was actually *better.*

"I started odd jobbing. Started doing a little streetcorner stuff, little comedy routines for money tossed in a hat. Even got a gig at a diner for a stand up routine a couple times. And guess what—surprise surprise, I'm GOOD at it! Wow, the guy with the cutie mark of a *banana peel and a cartoon bomb* is good at comedy. IMAGINE THAT, GRANDMA AND GRANDPA! WHAT A LEAP OF LOGIC!" His strangled shriek was delivered point blank at his horrified grandparents' faces.

"I've spent the last year living my dream, but every minute of it looking over my shoulder, convinced that you were gonna send those hired goons of yours, those two enormous stallion who couldn't speak Equestrian, to find me and physically drag me back home to the island like you did when I was ten and tried to run away and join a travelling show. Do you know I've spent my entire life since with a pathological fear of unibrows? Even now I scream and wet myself when I heard a Hosstrian accent without warning.

"And now here you are, you finally came after me. And you know what? I DON'T CARE! I don't care if you scream at me, or yell at me, or threaten me, or cut me off, or disown me-- I'm NOT going back, I'm NOT going to schmooze with the rich and worthless for you, I'm NOT going to be your
heir apparent to your *stupid* Banana Empire!”

He grinned at them in wild-eyed maniacal triumph, his tie askew and his mane a tousled mess. His entire clan (with the exception of Nanner Puddin', who was giggling fit to bust) stared at him in wide-eyed shock, and possibly a bit of fear, thoroughly cowed. All around, ponies-- those in the watch and those in the Nobody's Fools-- were fighting to keep from laughing. The desk jockeys and dispatcher were doubled over with silent laughter. Even the watch ponies were sniggering up their armored sleeves. “Oh, and one other thing,” he said, suddenly calm and collected, his voice mellifluous. “Just for the record, in case anypony wonders, really all I'm trying to say is--”

He lunged over the rail, grabbed the microphone to the intercom off the dispatcher's desk, and screamed

“I.”

“HATE.”

“BANANAS!!”

It took several minutes for all the ponies present to regain their composure.

It was not a good day for the Watch. While many of the kids they'd collared were getting chewed out for getting on the wrong side of the law, the law was finding out that many of the Nobody's Fools had a surprising number of parental figures in their corner. Wheezer was currently being fussied over by his mother, a chubby little olive-colored pony with a black mane in a bun and a baker's apron and a mothering attitude that hovered around her in a cloud. When she found out that her baby's medicines and inhaler had been confiscated had proceeded to turn into a screeching fury who had verbally torn through the arresting officers, leaving them shaking and broken in her wake-- and hustling to get her baby's inhaler back to him.

Fledge's parents were no less formidable. His father was currently staring down a desk jockey with a gaze that could spot a vole scurrying through the grass at a thousand feet. “Are you telling me,” he said in a deceptively calm voice, “That my son goes to visit his friends-- who are some of North Face Leap's favorite clients, by the way-- and you arrest him, throw him in a paddywagon and drag him down here to book him just for being present and in your reach?”

Another watchpony was undergoing something of a zen exercise, trying to deal with Bowser's parents. The two Diamond Dogs stared at him, uncomprehending, as he tried to explain for a third time why their adopted son was sitting cuffed to a stool. “So... he do nothing? Then why he here?”
“Your son is being held on suspicion of involvement with a group with possible ties to a suspected group with potential terrorist intentions...” he rattled off the legalese, hoping to buffalo them into turning their ire on their surely miscreant son.

Contrary to popular misunderstanding due to certain mentally deficient populations of their species roaming abroad in Equestria.... Diamond dogs do not buffalo easily. The male of the pair looked at him with half-lidded, contemptuous eyes and began counting off on his fingers. “So...maybe involved with group that maybe connected to other group that maybe have plans that maybe terrorist...” He held up a paw. “Four maybes. You get one more maybe, you reach 'once upon a time.' “ His eyelids drooped further. “We know ponies think Diamond Dogs stupid, but ROCKS not THAT dumb.”

Still another was dealing with the ire of Flute's mother and father. And flubbing fantastically. “He resisted arrest, he's refused to cooperate with us, to answer any questions or give us any information when we demanded it--”

“He's a MUTE, you idiot!” Flute's mother said on an ascending shout. She had voice for opera and she knew how to use it. “How was he supposed to cooperate with you WHEN HE CAN'T EVEN SPEAK?? ARE YOU OVERPAID THUGS DELIBERATELY TRAINED TO TERRORIZE THE HANDICAPPED???”

Her husband gave the mortified watchpony an amused look. “So tell me, young feller, how's that horseshoe you're wearing actually taste?”

Flute wasn't even paying attention. He was too busy helping Softy's mother comfort him as he tearfully looked over the boxes of maimed toys he had made... While Softy's father, a slate grey unicorn with eyes like chipped ice, went between eyeing the stack of "evidence boxes" full of the children's damaged possessions, and eyeballing another unfortunate watchpony like he was deciding which internal organ to remove first. "I hope you've got a receipt for all that," he said in a sibilant hiss.

Mayor Fussbudget was not a happy pony anymore. He sat in the Commissioner's office, listening to the uproar as the parents of the Nobody's Fools clashed with the City Watch's bureaucracy, nursing his bandaged leg, barking at his intern and contemplating his next move. This was not going as planned. It seemed these hoodlums were not, as he thought, a bunch of half-abandoned street urchins. They had parents. Involved parents. Some of them were even respectable.

Gold Star was sitting across from him, looking amused. “Welcome to the nitty-gritty world of law enforcement,” he said. “Dealing with irate parents and guardians of children who've broken the law. Of course, it's worlds easier when you didn't bend the law yourself... or when they've actually done something to justify it.”

“They're being arrested on suspicion of conspiracy to terrorism,” the Mayor snapped. “That's perfectly legal.”

Gold Star sat up behind his desk and leaned forward. “No, Mayor,” he said calmly. “Reasonable suspicion is perfectly legal. And that's only good for briefly detaining somepony, not arresting them and throwing them in the clink, which requires probable cause. And you don't even have either of those, here.”

“We got a warrant! They sent a terrorist threat to my office!” He held up the document in question.

“That warrant your cousin signed has holes in it you could drive the Friendship Express through,” Gold Star snorted. “Somepony slipping a letter with a logo stamped on it onto your desk doesn't
count as evidence. Anypony could have written that letter and drawn that logo based off that one colt's rainbow-paint murals. Your petty grudge against the Nobody's Fools has made you stupid." He looked out of the office window on the growing ruckus in the main floor. “The only reason I have cooperated with you is because you would have suspended me, appointed one of your cronies in my place, and then gone out with a brute squad and turned this fiasco into an outright tragedy.”

Fussbudget turned from red to purple. He marched out of the office, intern scurrying in his wake. The moment he came into view the parents rounded on him and closed in. The din became deafening. Mayor Fussbudget seized the dispatcher's microphone (much to her annoyance, it was really getting on her nerves when ponies did that) and climbed up on a handy stool.

“NOW LISTEN UP!” he shouted. The crowd of angry parents quieted down. “These youngsters have been arrested, and are being detained, on suspicion of terrorist activity. We secured physical evidence of their involvement and a warrant for their arrest, complete with a judge's signature. They are not going ANYWHERE!”

“I beg to differ,” somepony drawled.

Everyone turned to see who the speaker was. She stood in the door, in a short skirt and a long jacket with creases as crisp as new legal forms. She had panniers loaded with scrolls, polished hooves that shone like justice and a glare so hard it could etch glass.

“Hello again, Mayor,” Harshwhinny said as she strode into the building. “I believe you know me. I am the personal assistant of Princess Rainbow Dash. I am here to see to the release of the ponies... and others... collectively known as the Nobody's Fools. Please get to it.” She stood there with the air of someone pretending to wait patiently.

The collective response was best summed up as “What?” Several ponies in fact said this. Some were confused. A few were elated. One was infuriated. “WHAT?” Mayor Fussbudget said, sputtering. “Just who do you think you are??”

Harshwhinny's eyelids lowered a micrometer. “I believe I already stated that in full,” she said, her lip curling.

“Poindexter!” the mayor shouted. Reading his boss' mind, the lanky intern scurried forward with the papers. “We have a warrant--” the Mayor started to rant. He snatched it from Poindexter and crammed it into her face.

Harshwhinny's sneer didn't budge an inch. “I could pilot Her Highness' royal zeppelin through the holes in that document,” she said. “And even if it were worth more than the paper it was printed on... it's less than irrelevant.” She reached into her pannier and pulled out a scroll, snapping it open so sharply one could almost hear the whipcrack. “Royal Pardon, from Her Highness Princess Rainbow Dash.” She set it down and pulled out another with another snap. “Blanket amnesty for incidences involved in the arrest and incarceration of said individuals.” She pulled out a third. “Blanket amnesty for any prior arrests, charges, crimes and misdemeanours.”

Mayor Fussbudget seethed. He tried to play his last trump card. “Regardless, these have to go through the proper procedures and departments to--”

Without any other part of her expression changing, Miss Harshwhinny smiled at him. It was a sight to frighten full grown stallions. “Don't even try, Mayor,” she said. “I've already filled out all the paperwork, and I've greased the wheels in all the right places so that the necessary documents are already in manila files all over City Hall marked ‘Filed Yesterday.’"
“Let me make it clear: You have screwed up. You've bent the law in more places than a Silly Straw, made a public spectacle of yourself doing it---brilliant move, by the way, bringing along a news reporter on your little “raid” in hopes of a photo op---and left a paper trail a blind idiot could follow. I'm a career bureaucrat. I know ALL the tricks, Mayor.

"The Nobody's Fools are walking out of here, and they're walking out of here with a clean slate. You give me even a moment's hassle on releasing these children and I will make you think you have your man-tackle in a pencil sharpener. I'm from the government, Mister Mayor, and I eat my own kind."

Fussbudget swallowed, sweat rolling down his temple. “Officers, release the suspects,” he whimpered.

Foster leaned over to Spritz. “Dude. I'm kinda scaroused, right now.” Spritz nodded, wide eyed.

Harshwhinny turned and faced the crowd. “On behalf of Her Highness,” she said in a carrying voice, “I would like to apologize to all involved for the inconvenience and hardship this incident has caused.” The mood of the crowd of parents improved notably. “By way of apology, Her Highness Princess Rainbow Dash has issued free passes to all the members of the Nobody's Fools, and their immediate families, to the grand opening Wonderbolts show tonight at the Thunderdome---” shouts of disbelief and surprise greeted this. The mood went relieved to festive. Harshwhinny looked down in her pannier. “And... ten-bit coupon stubs for the concession stand as well,” she finished in a monotone. “We have transportation waiting outside to take you all to the stadium now.” Happy, if happily bewildered, ponies began filing outside, golden tickets in hoof.

Harshwhinny turned back to the somewhat frazzled Watch and their train-wrecked Mayor. “I have been ordered to personally secure and escort the leader of the Nobody's Fools known as Mach One, and Her Highness' royal assistant Scootaloo,” she said. “Where are they?”

“I'll take you to them.” Gold Star had stepped out of the office and was standing behind the Mayor.

“Thank you.” As Harshwhinny strode past the Mayor she fished a newspaper out of her pannier and tossed it to him. It struck him in the chest and fell to the floor in front of him, falling with the front page up. MAYORAL FIASCO, the headline blared. Above the fold was a full color photograph of the Mayor howling in pain as the Princess’ enraged junior apprentice sank her teeth into his foreleg. WINNING FRIENDS AND INFLUENCING PEOPLE, the caption read. Mayor Fussbudget strikes again: Mayor arrests foster sister of new Princess in “raid” on local skateboarding club.

Fussbudget groaned.

Mach One and Scootaloo had been left alone in one of the precinct's spare offices, a watch pony standing guard at the open door. To “Separate the gang from the influence of their leader” and to “protect the filly from retaliation for being an informant,” had been the reason given. Scootaloo knew better; that rotten Mayor was doing it to make the other colts scared by dragging Mach away...and to keep her from talking to the others so they'd keep thinking she really had ratted them out. The knowledge sat in her stomach like a lead ball.

They were sitting in opposite corners of the room, not saying anything. Mach One was carefully not
looking at her, his face stony. Scootaloo wet her lips, trying to speak. Her tongue felt like it was made of stone. “I’m sorry,” she blurted out. “I’m sorry, Mach, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you I was with Rainbow Dash.” She choked. “But I promise, I swear I didn’t rat you out to the mayor!”

Mach lifted his head and looked at her in surprise. “I didn’t!” she repeated. “I didn’t tell anyone your names, or where your hideout was--- not even Rainbow Dash! Heck, she woulda given me what for, if I broke my word to somepony like that! I was supposed to talk to you guys for her,” she lamented. “To persuade you to come see her. She wanted to see you, it's really important.... but that stupid Mayor found out I knew and... he must've had somepony tail me or something---” She started puddling up. She wiped at her eyes angrily.

“Wait wait wait, hold on,” Mach said, holding up his hooves. “I believe you.”

“You do?” she croaked tearily. “That I didn’t squeal?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said. He let out a little laugh. “I sorta figured that out when you bit the Mayor.” He crossed the room, pulling a tissue from the box on the desk with his good wing. He dabbed at her eyes. “Come on now, tough girls don't cry...”

“Then—then why were you sitting there looking so mad?” she snuffled. She took the tissue from him and wiped her nose.

“I wasn't mad at you.” He lowered his head and looked aside. “I was trying to figure out how to apologize to you.”

“Wha? Why?”

“Because I've screwed up your life!” he said, his rump hitting the floor. “You're a Princess' assistant... hoofmaiden... foster... thingy. Whatever. You're up there with royalty! And now you've been arrested, and your name has been dragged in the mud. Because of US. Because of me.” He hung his head.

Scootaloo started giggling through her snuffles. He looked at her, puzzlement on his face. “Boy, you REALLY don't know Rainbow Dash,” she said. “She couldn't care less about this kind of thing. Shoot, she probably woulda sneaked out and tried to join the Nobody's Fools herself, if she thought she could!”

“So, what, she likes pranks or something?”

Scootaloo laughed. “She loves them! She pulls them all the time! She and Pinkie Pie used to prank everyone in Ponyville all the time.”

“You're kidding.”

Scootaloo snickered. “My favorite was the one she did with the four piglets.”

Mach was hooked. “What did she do with the four piglets?” he asked, leaning in, an anticipatory smile on his face.

Scootaloo leaned in too. “Okay, so she borrowed four baby piggies from Applejack's farm,” she said. “And she let them loose in Town Hall.”

“That's, well, okay, kinda funny, but it's not much.” Mach said, unimpressed.

“Well this is the good part,” Scootaloo said. “Just before she let them loose, she painted numbers on
their sides. One, Two, Three,... and Five.”

It took him a minute, then understanding blossomed on his face. “Oh that is brilliant and evil,” he said.

Scootaloo cackled. “Mayor Mare spent the whole day going out of her mind trying to find Pig number Four!” she said gleefully. The two snorted and guffawed for a minute.

“Considering she pranked the Mayor, I get the feeling she's scraped up against the law herself a little bit,” Mach One said.

Scootaloo smiled sentimentally. “Yeah,” she said. “She's not gonna be too wound up about this. Especially since it was the MAYOR that screwed everything up.” Her smile faded. “Do... do you think the other Fools are mad at me?”

Mach One thought. “Well, they might be a little bit mad you never told them you worked for a Princess,” he said. “It sorta came out in an ugly surprise, after all. But they'll get over it. All us Fools have secrets, after all.” he shrugged. “And if any of ’em are dumb enough to blame you for what happened, I'll have a word with ’em.” He looked around. “Well,” he said, his good cheer fading. “If we get out of THIS mess, anyway.”

Somepony rapped on the door frame. The two looked up. Standing in the hallway were Gold Star and Harshwhinny. “Come along, you two,” Harshwhinny said sternly. “We're going back to the Princess.”

Mach's ears pricked up under his hoodie. “What? “We?” “

“Yes, you too,” Harshwhinny said patiently. “Now that the Royal pardon has gone through, we need to be moving. Chop chop.”


They marched out single file, Harshwhinny in the lead. When they reached the bullpen they found the Mayor still standing there, looking as depressed as a half-deflated parade float, and staring at the front page of a freshly printed newspaper. As they walked past, Mach looked over at the newspaper and read the headline. He sighed and shook his head.

The Mayor looked up at him and froze. In all the hubbub, he had never gotten a good look at the hoodied leader of the gang they'd rounded up. His face froze in horrified recognition. “You??” he croaked.

Mach One sighed, deigning to answer the unspoken question. “You always were a poozer, Uncle Fussbudget,” he said, and walked on out without even looking back.
There was a royal chariot waiting for them. The three of them piled aboard, and they went airborne. They cut through the sky, ascending rapidly on a course for the Thunderdome. The moment they were off the ground, Scootaloo pounced. “Uncle Fussbudget??” she yelped, all but leaping into Mach One's face. “That doofy mayor is your UNCLE?”

He pushed her back a bit, trying to get some space. “…I told you everypony has secrets,” he said.

Scootaloo scowled, her lower lip pooching out and her cheeks puffing up. “Ohhhh no ya don’t,” she said. “You're not gonna pull that half-answer no-answer ca-ca on ME!” She pounced on him for real this time, leaping on his back and digging her forehooves into his ribs, tickling mercilessly. “Talk! Talk! We have ways to make you talk!!”

“AAUGH! All right, all right, DOWN!” He shook her off and dumped her on the floor of the chariot. “Okay, so yeah, he’s my uncle. By marriage, anyway.”

“So why are you and him…” Scootaloo fished for the right words.

“At loggerheads? At war with each other? Ready to strangle each other?” Mach gave her a wry grin. “It's a little bit of a story.”

“When I was about five my parents… passed away,” he said. “It was a really sucky year; I'd just had my bad wing cut off, and then my Mom and Dad get caught in an accident in the weather factory…. so, yeah, not my favorite year, that one. Anyway, Uncle Fussbudget took me in. For about six months.” a faint sneer curled his lip. “See, he was running for Mayor for the very first time, and he apparently figured that the voters would eat it up if he fostered a poor little crippled orphan.”

Mach snorted. “He dragged me around for his campaign meetings and rallies, fed me lines to say... when we were offstage I didn't even exist to him. Had one of his assistants look after me. I might as well have been a cardboard cutout, for all he really cared.”

“Wow,” was all Scootaloo could say.

He rolled his eyes and shrugged at her pitying look. “Anyway the breaking point was a few days before the election, on my birthday. It was craptacular.... In two birthdays I’d gone from celebrating with my Mom and Dad at home, to having it in a hospital with a bandaged stump, to blowing out candles on a fake birthday cake-- no lie, it was a prop made out of paper mache’-- at a ten bit a plate fundraiser hosted by some “flightless pride” activist group.

“They drag me up front; I blow out the candles. The reporters start lobbing fluff questions at me, one of them asks me what I wished for... and I sort of... snapped.” He looked a little sheepish. "I told them I wished my parents weren't dead, I wished that I wasn't a stupid cripple, and I wished I was living with anypony other than my stupid, butt kissing, vote-grubbing uncle.”

He made a motion with his hooves like something exploding. “Boom. Uncle's campaign went into freefall. Damage control going ballistic, spin doctors flailing around like a skateboarder bailing down a staircase... he still got elected, but it was a close thing.

“About a week later he decided it was in my best interests if I went and lived with Great Granny Doppler out in Manehattan.” he snickered. “Of course, as his rotten luck would have it, about a year she moved us back to Windy City. He never knew we moved back--- he sorta broke off contact after that little fiasco. Can't imagine why.” Scootaloo snickered. " We got a cheap little flat on the South
He smiled fondly. “Great Granny’s okay. Lets me do my own thing. She sorta let me run wild though, and pretty soon I took up with a bunch of other no-accounts who hung out up on Scholar’s Peak....”


“Yup. Unc was already on their crap list. He'd gotten reelected on a 'clean up the streets' campaign... where he basically scapegoated all the skate rats like me and the Fools as 'criminal hooligans' and 'gang members' dirtying up the city.” He rolled his eyes. “I figured my being a relative meant my name was dirt with them too. But Lightning Gale was lead dawg back then; he thought the stunt I pulled on Unc was hilarious. When they found out about me they took me right in. We've been pranking him on and off ever since.”

“That's kind of...vindictive, isn't it?” Scootaloo said. She was momentarily pleased that she remembered a two bit word like Sweetiebelle would use.

“Darn right it is. I was a good little foal, ate my alfalfa and did what I was told. What did I get? I got used. First as a poster boy, then as a scapegoat.” His face grew fierce. Then he snickered. “The best part is that he never knew it was his own nephew doing it.... till now.” He cackled. "Ahh, that's rich.”

“Besides, he ain't just picking on us,” Mach went on soberly. “To ponies like my uncle, the rules are only for little ponies. Your rights? Life, liberty, property? Those are for sale to whoever can pay him or get him the most votes.

“His crony friends don't like street vendors competing with their stores? Suddenly the fee for a pushcart license goes through the roof. Some 'Concerned Parent' group he thinks will get him votes frets about little Precious getting a boo-boo? He'll be tearing down the monkey bars on the playground next week, and passing helmet laws for tricycles. Some health nut control freak complains ponies are getting fat? He outlaws Big Chug soda cups and makes it illegal to sell hayburgers after 6pm.”

“Really? He did all that?” Scootaloo said. Wow. If Rainbow Dash ever got told she couldn't get a hayburger after 6pm, there would be blood on the walls.

Mach nodded. “Yup, and even worse stuff. He's run ponies out of business by siccing inspectors on them. Used eminent domain to have entire streets bulldozed. Got rid of a political group that was protesting how high their taxes were by convincing the Academy student cause-heads that they were a hate group, and letting the cause-heads do his dirty work and harass them into oblivion.

“You know what the most pathetic thing is? Uncle is small potatoes. Career politicians are all the same. In front of the camera they kiss babies. Off camera they steal their candy.” He looked over the side of the chariot, brooding. “Sometimes it seems like Nobody's Fools are the only ones with the guts to even give them grief about it.”

He shook himself.”Eh, don't let me get all grimdark on you, Rookie,” he said, and shrugged. “It's just how I am. If Ponies want to push me around, try and make me obey all their little rules-- well, then, I aim to misbehave.” he smiled a little. “And if I can have a little fun along the way, hey...”

Scootaloo chuckled. “Giving a wedgie to the Powers that Be, huh?” Mach one stifled a snicker and nodded briefly.
“Well, Mister Mach One,” came Harshwhinny's dry interjection, “One certainly hopes that you can suppress your natural animosity for authority figures during this coming little _tete’ a tete_.”

Mach One was taken aback. “This what?” he said.

“A face to face,” Harshwhinny said with exaggerated patience. The cloudy walls of the Thunderdome loomed before them. “This is the reason for all of this. Her Highness, Princess Rainbow Dash, wishes to speak to you. Face to face. Privately.”

In the short time Scootaloo had known Mach One, she had never seen the one-winged pony look even remotely nervous. He was just too cool. To Scootaloo's surprise and amusement, he was seriously looking nervous now. He'd gone from looking too hip for the room to looking like a foal headed for the principal's office in a matter of seconds. “Well,” he said, his voice cracking. “Ain't that just swell.” He pulled the hood of his baggy sweatshirt up over his head till he almost disappeared into it.

Rather than parking in the cloud-lots slowly circling the Thunderdome (and weren't the ponies who parked there going to have fun finding their chariots after the show), they alighted at the top of the wall, next to the observation tower. She opened a door to the tower. “The Princess is waiting in the room right at the top of these stairs. Scootaloo started to follow as well. “No, not you, just him,” Harshwhinny told her.

“Why not?” Scootaloo said, faintly worried.

Harshwhinny held out her watch. “I believe you have other obligations?” she said. “You have about thirty minutes to--”

“Omigosh omigosh omigosh!” Scootaloo squealed, dancing on her hooftips. “Sorry, Mach, I gotta go get ready--” she galloped off as fast as her little hooves would take her, her scooter bouncing between her shoulder blades.

“Follow me,” Harshwhinny said to Mach. Mach hunched up defensively and obeyed.

The observation room... lounge, really... was a glassed-in chamber atop a short tower on the top tier of the Thunderdome, just under the announcer's booth. As the Thunderdome was a temporary structure, it was a bit spartan-- just a wide room with a few shapeless cloud sofas, a couple of tables with refreshments, and little else. It was intended as a VIP lounge of some sort, though Dash was a little fuzzy as to why you needed a VIP lounge when you already had a royal box...

Out the window was a spectacular view of the olympian stadium below. It was enormous, with seating for tens of thousands, illuminated from above with enormous magic lantern arrays that flickered alight as the sun slowly crept to the horizon. It was already crowding with ponies, tiny flecks of color sprinkled along the white inner slopes; a vast dark chasm down below, flickering faintly with distant lightning.

As Wagnerian, if not outright Heavy Metal, as the view was, it wasn't holding Rainbow Dash's attention. She had gotten word back that the issue at the Watch Department had been more or less resolved, and that even now Harshwinny was on her way back with the mystery stallion that had
eluded them all this time. The mystery stallion who apparently led a band of back-alley rebels who had kept the Mayor and all his flunkies in a tailspin for years. Who had eluded the Watch and even her own Wonderbolts, effortlessly pulling off the sickest moves she'd ever seen, with one wing--

Her hooves were getting sweaty.

“Omigosh omigosh omigosh,” she muttered to herself. She fanned herself with her wings trying to cool-- to calm herself down. She checked her mane, checked to make sure the magically preserved rose he'd thrown to her ohhh that had been sooo hot WHOA rein it in, girl was still tucked behind her ear, checked her peytral, tiara and hoofshoes was the whole Princess regalia stuff too much? Not enough?...No, it's good, checked her reflection in the window for the hundredth time, and all but danced in place with nervousness as she waited for him to arrive.

A pony cleared their throat at the door (one could hardly KNOCK on a cloud door very easily, after all.) “Your Highness? I have returned with Mach One as you requested.”

It’s something of a truism that those who act bold and overconfident are often using that to bury their insecurities, and this situation was digging up parts of Dash that normally took a metaphorical bulldozer to unearth. For lack of any other frame of reference, she decided that her best approach with this was to (ugh) channel at least a little Rarity. She frantically brushed her mane over, trying to make it drape over her eye in a rogueish fashion, and leaned in a Rarity-like, seductive (she hoped) pose against the refreshment table. “Send him in,” she called out-- wincing as her voice cracked... suddenly and painfully aware of how silky and sultry her voice wasn't.

The door opened, and a pony sidled into the room. The room was growing dim as the sun outside slowly set, but he had a definitely masculine profile against the light from the door. He was covered from head to flank in a huge baggy blue hoody--- my his shoulders must be broad under that--- only his muzzle visible from under the hood.

"Should she go with sultry? No. Husky. Her voice was already raspy; she could manage husky. “So, we finally meet,” she purred, slipping around the end of the table--- and, forgetting that she was leaning against it and thus was overbalanced, promptly fell over with a thud. He stood stock still, staring down at her in surprise.

“I'm up! I'm up! I'm okay,” she said, leaping to her hooves, blowing her mane out of her face. “Pfew. So... we finally meet. Again.” She coughed. Brush it off, brush it off... she stepped in closer, her eyes heavy lidded. “You wouldn't believe what we went through looking for you. I've been dying to meet you.” She let a slow smile creep across her face.

“Uh, really?” the hooded pony said, pulling back a bit. His voice was unusually high. “...Why?”

“Well,” Dash said. She pulled the rose from behind her ear with her wingtip and held it under her nose, fluttering her lashes at him. “You certainly know how to get... a girl's...attention.” She stepped even closer.

“Uh, heh. Whoa...” he stammered, laughing nervously.

*Hold up. His voice really was awful high.* “Wait a minute--” she scowled. She lowered her head to peer under his baggy hood. “WHAT--??” She reached up, threw back his hood, and with a flick of her horn brought up the lights. Her screech of alarm nearly punctured his eardrums.

“OH TARTARUS, YOU'RE JUST A KID!!!”
The Royal Box was something of a misnomer. With the number of guests Dash had accrued, it would be more accurate to call it the Royal Seating Section. They had actually had to expand it out at the last minute (fortunately an easy proposition with cloud-crete. Huzzah for pegasus architecture.)

The first section was for the various nobility, nouveau riche and hob-nobbers which no royal appearance could seem to avoid. Dash had never quite forgiven the upper crust for looking at her like something stuck to the bottom of their hooves at the Grand Galloping Gala, and had taken great delight in moving their seating down in ranking, and away from herself. What made it better was that they obviously knew they were being snubbed, and obviously knew they could never say a word about it, even behind the Princess' back-- because they would look like absolute trolls, as their seats were being moved to make room for the handicapped children from the Windy City Foals' Clinic.

Of course, they might find the gumption to grind their teeth about being moved down another tier, at the very last minute no less, to make room for the Nobody's Fools and their families. They still didn't dare make a fuss; after all, they were still far higher up in the stadium seating and far closer to the Princess than anypony else, which was all that really mattered to most of them. So they ignored the rowdy rabble in the seats above them as best they could and bore up under their hardship like true Equestrian upperclass.(1)

If they had known who it was in the seats above them they might have been more grateful that they were merely being noisy. It was their good fortune that the skate-rat pranksters of Windy City were too excited and distracted to realize that they were sitting within quite literal spitting distance of the exact sort of ponies they normally considered prime pranking material. Giddy from their reversal of fortune and boggled with awe at the epic cloud coliseum all around them, they had dismounted from the sky-trolleys that had brought them there, gawking at everything. After a brief stampede on the nearest concession stand, they had thundered out into the stadium and piled into their seats, their somewhat confused families in tow, yelling, joking, waving Wonderbolt flags, chucking popcorn kernels at each other and annoying the upper class by mere proximity.

Of course, for some this impromptu family outing was a confounding situation. The Banana family in particular was, if not gored on the horns of a dilemma, then possibly snagged on the antlers of a cognitive dissonance. In less than an hour they had gone from descending en masse on Windy City(2) to retrieve what several regarded as the black sheep of the family from the clutches of the Law for actions that had surely shamed his aspiring, social-climbing clan, to receiving a royal invitation from the Princess of Loyalty herself to sit in the Royal Box among the very upper crust they aspired to--- thanks, indirectly, to that very same black sheep of the family.

It was making things.... awkward.

The only one who was oblivious to the awkwardness was Banana Puddin', who was sitting next to her favorite big brother and happily snarfing through a ball of cotton candy as large as her entire body. “I was right, this is even cooler than being a bank robber!” she said with her mouth full.

“So glad you approve,” Foster said, amused. He looked over at the rest of the family, who were sitting in the row together, just a seat or two down, all looking vaguely uncomfortable. He prodded Puddin' and nodded towards the rest of the family. “Kinda look like they wanna fart but they're scared to risk it, don't they?” Puddin' snort-giggled into her cotton candy. “Think they'll stay mad long?”
“Gramma might,” Puddin’ said after a moment's thought.

“Nah, really?”

“Well... she's never happy about anything,” Puddin' pointed out reasonably, “So how could anypony ever tell?” She was of course artlessly loud when she said it; Foster saw the family matriarch stiffen up at that proclamation. Puddin', oblivious to the hit she'd scored, scrutinized her big brother with a serious look on her face. “Foster?.... You don't really hate bananas, do you?” She said it as if it were the most important question in the universe.

Foster chuckled. Puddin' was like his exact opposite; she was about everything Banana. She'd live on nothing but bananas if the family let her. But he didn't miss the way their mother's ears pricked up to catch the answer. He looked out over the stadium, watching the heat lightning flashing far down below, and made sure his voice carried. “Well, not exactly hate,” he admitted. “They're... okay once in a while. I guess I just had too much of 'em all at once, got sick on 'em.” He gave her a cockeyed grin. “But... I still like 'em. If they aren't pushed on me.”

Nanner Puddin' shrugged at the answer. But Foster could tell his parents had heard what he was really saying. His mother slid over closer. “Foster,” she said. “Did we really... over do it?”

Foster looked down at his hooves. “It wasn't anything you did wrong, Ma,” he said. “I've always known I was meant for other things.” His expression was wry. “I just kinda got tired of having my destiny dictated to me by a fruit.”

To his surprise, she chuckled. She looked at him with tired eyes. “Even if I can't understand all this...” she waved a hoof, wordlessly indicating the stadium, Windy City, the Nobody's Fools, her son's 'career' as an aspiring comedian, everything “--I guess I can understand that.” She looked at him. “Just tell me. Are you really happy?”

He smiled and shrugged. “It's touch and go and sometimes the audience loves you and sometimes it hates you and right now if I emptied out my bank account I could maybe buy you lunch,” he confessed. “But-- yeah. It makes me happy.”

“Then I suppose there's not more than any of us can ask of it,” Banana Creme' sighed with a laugh. She rested her head on her oldest child's shoulder.

“Thanks Ma.”

Not every member of the clan was quite as ready to be accepting. Grandma Liqueur managed to look both sorrowful and offended at the same time. “All in vain,” she said, as if she were in mourning. “To think that all that effort was in vain-- all the money the family spent just on his tuition--”

“Ahh, shaddap, ya old BAT!” Her husband barked.

Everyone jumped in astonishment. The hoary old pegasus almost never spoke, and when he did it was always in a quiet mumble. He'd always given the impression, even to his own family, of a dozy, elderly stallion, off in his own little world. Apparently the old codger had decided to come out of that little world and speak his mind for once.

Banana Liqueur gaped at her husband in shock. “Supreme--?” she said, scandalized.

“You heard me, ya battlaxe!” he said. “You've had yer snoot stuck in the air for the past twenty years an' I'm sick of it! All yer time worried about what them Canterlot upper-crust types think of ye. Well here's a hint, woman: They DON'T. ” He glared out from under his bushy white brows at her and shook his head. “Ever since we built the mansion...” he muttered to himself.
He harrumphed. “I didn't take our banana farm and a chain of little islands and turn it into the biggest fresh fruit producer in Equestria to start some dippity-do hoity toity DYNASTY, woman. I did it so our foals and grandfoals and great-grandfoals wouldn't want for anything. So they could choose their own way in life. Doctor or lawyer or artist or comedian... or heck, banana farmer.” He sobered a bit. “So long as they make good use o' what I left 'em, that's all I care about.”

Uncle Smoothie rolled his eyes. “Well, that's a few thousand bits in tuition wasted.”

Banana Supreme reached over and clocked him on the back of the head with a hoof, making his second eldest son's eyes roll again, this time in opposite directions. “You hush up too, boy,” the old stallion said. “I've wasted bigger wads o' dough on more foolish things. Seein' what snooty twits and brainless mush-heads that Academy turns out now, the boy probably saved us money by quittin' early.” He raised his voice and looked down the row to where Foster sat. “You go on, grandson. You be the best dang comedian the Banana family ever had. You found yourself; far as I'm concerned that tuition was money well spent.”

Banana crème chuckled and gave her son a hug. “Well, at least what's left of your tuition will give you a nice nest egg,” she said.

Foster looks confused. “But I sent the tuition back!” he said. At his mother's confused look, he explained. “I quit after six months, Ma. I was so short-term that the financial office refunded me nearly all the money. But it didn't feel right keeping it, so I had them just send it back...”

“Send it back? To who?” his father said.

“Well, to whoever in the family handled the financial--” Foster stopped, an indescribable expression crossing his face. “Uncle Smoothie--!” As one, the entire family turned and glared at Banana Smoothie. Banana Smoothie gave a sickly smile back.

Nanner Puddin' didn't even look up from her cotton candy. “Uncle Smoothie's in trouble again, isn't he?” she said to Foster.

“Yep, looks like,” Foster agreed.

---

Soft Touch sat, his sewing kit in his hand, looking sadly at his box of torn plushies. Those bullies at the Watch had torn them all open right in front of him. Looking for “contraband,” they said. Then when they'd found nothing but stuffing they'd just tossed them all in a cardboard box. To his shame he'd cried a little when he'd seen the condition they were in. Not one of the Fools had teased him though.

Sniffling a little, he pulled his sewing kit out of his pannier, threaded a needle, picked up a doll and started sewing up the teddy bear's torn belly.

A moment later he felt somepony sit down next to him. It was his father, back from the concession stand with some snacks. Softy didn't look up at him. He could feel his father's eyes on him, but he couldn't bring himself to look up. He just tucked his head down and kept stitching away.

For the longest time they just sat there. Without a word, his father reached down, pulled a needle and
thread out of the kit, picked up one of the damaged dolls and started quietly sewing.

Softy smiled quietly. Sometimes, the best things you can say don’t use words.

Presto’s parents were polite, clean cut, intellectual types. Which more than suited them, as they were both professors at the Academy. They were also both unicorns, while he was not. These things had always made things between them—complicated. From the moment their only son had been born, and they had realized that, like his paternal grandfather and maternal grandmother, he was an earth pony, they had resolved to be as understanding, supportive, and encouraging as two parents could be.

Unfortunately, in their case this meant that they understood that their earth pony son could never truly wield or understand magic, supported him in pursuing other interests, and encouraged him constantly that being a magicless earth pony was just as special as being a unicorn. They then found themselves rather perplexed in that the fruit of their loins persisted in doing the exact opposite of what they advised, what their education informed them was most emotionally healthy for ‘differently tribed’ children.

And... he seemed happier for it.

Presto’s father looked askance at his son. The colt was still dressed in his “Starswirl” robe and hat... the one with the mercifully deadened bells...and was digging through his recently ransacked saddlebags, pouch belt, bandoleer of vials, robe pockets, hidden compartment in his hat... sakes the boy had a ton of places to stash things... “Ahem. Everything in order...?”

“Yeah,” Presto grumbled. “Everything’s intact-- not for lack of trying on those thugs’ part. They completely upended my lab as it is. Hundreds of bits worth of salvaged ingredients and bits of equipment and whatnot just trashed. I had to throw a screaming fit and threaten all sorts of legal action to keep them from doing the same with all my personal effects.” He snorted. “Amazing how the threat of a lawsuit and lawyer suddenly makes law enforcement officers act respectable.”

“A laboratory?” Professor Kazam said faintly.

Presto nodded absently. “You’d be amazed at what you can scavenge from the trash cans in the Academy,” he said. He pulled a cracked crystal out of one of his pockets and looked at it in disgust. “Gah, they cracked it.... meh.” He cracked it in half; a small cloud of multicolored sparkles and translucent, slightly blurry butterflies swirled around them before spiraling into the sky and fading away.

“Was that a Gaskin's lesser illusion??” his mother exclaimed, staring into the sky.

“It was supposed to be a Gaskin's greater illusion,” Presto grumbled. “But the crystal cracked and distorted the template, and the charge leaked out...”

“But... you managed to store it in a crystal??” his mother said faintly. He nodded. A certain Professor Bibbity found her thoughts tumbling quite rapidly at her son’s words. “But how? It takes active concentration and thaumatic energy to even cast it, and holding the morphic resonance steady...” and you need a horn for that went unsaid.
“Not if you imprint the resonance into a crystal,” Presto said off the cuff, still fishing around. “Earth pony rock farming trick. Picked it up from a book by somepony named Maud Pie. Man, DRY reading, that was-- but it had a few tips and tricks in it. Anyway, it's a sort of a sloppy work-around... I use the crystal-etching to make a sort of animation, like a flipbook, and then infuse it with a thaumic charge by force-growing a typical garden-standard bean seedling around it. It takes hours, days really, but once it's done all I have to do is crush the crystal and it releases the image.” He looked disappointed. “I really wish I could figure a way to use them more than once, though.”

Gaskin's illusions. Pre-packaged. It was an odd, roundabout approach, but the sheer creativity to come up with that by oneself... Presto's parents looked at each other. Despite themselves they found themselves intrigued. Kazam cleared his throat. “You seem to be releasing it by triboluminescence,” he noted. “Perhaps if you used a separate crystal for the morphic pattern, and stored the thaumic power in something else--- something with piezoluminescent or piezoelectric qualities...?”

“Oooo, that'd work,” Presto said. His face lit up. He pulled out a notepad and a pencil and started sketching. “Fill a tube with crystallized twittermite glands... put a button on the side so you can compress it.... and cap it with a thaumically charged amethyst, and the morphic template on top of that---”

“But amethyst is terrible for magic,” Bibbity protested. “Even a tiny static charge makes it release any magical energy and ooooh I see what you're doing...” the two put their heads together over the crude pencil drawing.

Kazam saw another notepad peeking out of his son's pannier; he magically plucked it out and began flipping through it. Notes, formulae, mathematical notation, sketches of odd widgets and devices-- he recognized one or two of them down in the depths of the saddlebag. He could see notation incorporating not just earth pony magic but zebra potions and herbs, pegasus weather magic, and other exotic things--- broken down into bits and bobs, then reassembled into surprising, if somewhat crude, and daring new combinations. “You came up with all this?” he said, holding out the notebook.

Presto looked up and nodded briefly before returning to his sketch with is mother (Bibbity always had been more interested in the applied end of thaumatic sciences....) Leaving Kazam to peruse the notebook and think many long thoughts...

Fledge perched on the highest row of seats in between his parents. “So those crazy skate rat pranksters got you in with royalty,” his father said. “One minute you're in hot water with the Law, the next you're up here eating Jujubees on the Princess' dime.”

“Yup.” Fledge popped another jujubee into his beak. “Ponies are crazy.”

“Diamond dogs, gryphons and zonkeys don't seem much better off, but yeah.” His father chuckled. He looked down; down in the lowest row of seats sat Bowser with his two Diamond Dog parents. The decidedly earthbound dogs were sitting there with their paws over their eyes, terrified out of their minds--- but they had refused to stay behind regardless of how badly being up in the clouds clashed with their subterranean natures. Bowser, thanks to long exposure to the Nobody's Fools and their high flying antics, was doing far better, forehooves up on the rail, his tongue hanging out as he...

He was about to say something else when the most unholy shriek imaginable echoed from the observation tower above and behind them.

All three of them looked up in the direction the yell had come from. “Case in point,” Fledge's father said, cocking a feathered eyebrow.

Up in the final Royal box sat Ajax, accompanied by his royal guards. The seat next to him, Princess Dash's throne, was empty. He furrowed his brows in puzzlement. “The Princess,” he said to the pony Guards flanking the royal throne. “Where is she? The show will be starting soon...”

“The Princess sends her apologies,” her assistant-- Miss Harshwhicker, was it?-- said evenly. “An urgent matter of state came up that she must handle in private.”

Ajax gave her an amused look. “If she had to go to the loo, all you had to do was say so,” he said.

Harshwhinny actually managed to look stuffier. “I assure you that this...”

Ajax chortled. “Relax, Madam,” he said. “I was aware already that the Princess would be participating in the air show herself, so she wouldn't exactly be keeping me company.” He chuckled. “No need to get wound up over it.”

“....Understood,” Harshwhinny said. “Your graciousness in the matter is commenda--” From the observation tower rang a loud, if distant scream in a familiar voice. Ajax and the guards leapt to their feet, wings flared in alarm, but Harshwhinny merely looked up with a glare that was somehow both alarmed and utterly unsurprised. “Oh Tartarus, what nowwwwwoooooOOOOOP!” Before she could even finish her thought a glow of magic surrounded her and she was dragged, rump first, up into the air and through the wall of the observation lounge.

Ajax blinked. “Well,” he said after a moment. “I think I shall leave this to the Princess of Loyalty to handle...”

1) Pouting like infants.

2) They had been on a junket to examine their newest acquisition, a Banana Split stand called "Dairy Princess."

3) Somewhere over Baltimare, Applebloom sneezed.
“OhCrapOhCrapOhCrapcrapCRAP---”

Mach was a touch bewildered as to what had just occurred. One moment a smoking hot she-alicorn had been purring at him from an inch away, so close he could smell her body wash (Mountain Racer Sport scent, if you must know), the next there had been an earsplitting scream and a flash of light, and now she was on the opposite side of the room, squared off and hyperventilating in panic.

As for Dash, it was a shame she was so busy going into hysterics. She might have been able to appreciate having accomplished her very first short-range teleportation.

After a few seconds she managed to get something of a grip. She glared at the rangy pegasus colt on the opposite side of the room. “Ah, geez, what the buck is this? How old are you even, kid??”

Mach One bristled. “I'm fifteen. And how old are you, Grandma?” he snarked.

She growled but didn't answer him. Her horn suddenly lit up, and a moment later a seriously alarmed Harshwhinny was yanked through the wall and into the room. “You're an eyewitness,” Rainbow Dash said to her nervously. She pointed a hoof at Mach. “The kid is over there, I'm over here. Nothing's happening, nothing happened, nothing will happen--”

“I'm starting to take this personally,” Mach One said, his ears laid back in irritation.

“Shut up. I want your word you'll confirm nothing happened--”

Harshwhinny rolled her eyes. “The ponies standing guard outside this room can confirm that, Your Highness,” she said. “Cloud walls aren't exactly soundproofed.”

“Yeah, yeah, that's right,” Dash said, clutching her head with her wings. “So-- no harm no foul... why did you leave me alone if you knew--- you KNEW.” Dash's distress over her hairbreadth escape from infamy as a cradle robber turned to outrage. “You knew all along he was just a kid, and you-- How could you-- I OUGHTA--- Ooooooh!” She stood there seething, her mane frizzing.

Harshwhinny stood there, despite being yanked unceremoniously through the air, calm, collected, and with an evil smirk spread across her normally implacable face.

Mach interrupted what promised to be one hell of a row. “Hey, pardon me for butting in, Your Highness, but is there some reason other than kicking me in my masculine self esteem that you brought me up here?” he said irritably.

The Princess of Loyalty sighed and seemed to sag. She rubbed her face with a hoof. “Sorry, kid--”

“The name's 'Mach One,' not 'kid,'” the offended colt snapped.

“Mind your manners, young stallion,” Harshwhinny said as if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. “You're not as much of an adult as you think you are.”

“Considering how all the so-called adults I've seen in my life tend to act that's not much of a sell,” Mach said with an evil glare. “Now are you gonna keep insulting me or is somepony gonna tell me what they want? Or do I just turn around and walk out of here?”

Dash groaned. “Take the chip off your shoulder, we're not here to diss ya,” she said. “Just-- just take
She gestured at the cloud pillows scattered around the room. Moving stiffly, Mach jerked a nearby cushion over to him and sat down. Dash did the same. She gave the colt the once-over; he was practically radiating hostility now.

Great, I'm doing just great with this, she thought in annoyance. She couldn't exactly blame him for being honked off, either. She knew teenagers could be touchy, and she didn't know much about how guys thought but she could imagine that going from a filly from hitting on you to her cringing away from you like you smelled nasty would put anypony in a bad mood.

Hopefully what she told him next could patch things over. Or at least give him something else to think about. Just for the sake of argument she cast the detection spell again and waved her horn around him. Oh yeah, that tingling soda-fizz buzzing bell sensation was definitely there.

Mach looked at her like he was weighing whether he was closer to the exit than she was to him. “What the heck was that?” he demanded nervously. “Look, is this some sort of... new Alicorn Princess hazing ritual or something? Do you each have to go out, find some guy, and see how badly you can freak him out? If I run screaming from the building does that mean you win?”

Dash sat back down. She rubbed her face with one hoof. “Okay, let me take it from the top. I'm sorry about... hitting on you and all that. But that's not important now. There's a real serious reason you were brought up here.”

“Why me?” Mach frowned. “I'm just an ordinary guy.”

“Ordinary guy,” Dash said. “Yeaaaah, let's start with that....”

“You... think I'm an alicorn.”

Dash and Harshwhinny both nodded. “Um, a nascent one, yeah.”

He blinked slowly. “Okay. And there are more of us? All over Equestria.”

“Hey, me and my friends used to be, you know?” Dash pointed out.

“Yeah, yeah, I get that. Whoa.” He looked staggered. But who wouldn't. He took a long drink from the soda he'd plucked from the refreshment table, thinking things over. “And you're wanting to, what, trigger me or activate me or--”

“Ascend. Celestia says each of us should be powerful enough to perform Starswirl's ritual on our own, but...” Rainbow Dash winced. “I'm thinkin' we should wait until we get more of us together. Or at least get Twilight or Celestia or Luna to lead off. They're the smart, magical ones... I've... never been exactly the smartest one in our group, and I'm not really used to this horn yet.” She tapped it for emphasis. “Shoot, I'm still getting through the 'magic kindergarten' stuff.” She shrugged her wings and laughed weakly.

“And... eventually you think that if you ascend enough alicorns, you'll...”
“We'll figure out how to ascend everypony,” Dash finished. “We'll all be strong and tough as earth ponies, and magical as unicorns, and able to fly and walk on clouds like pegasuses. No more ponies dying of old age, or illness, or stupid little injuries that wouldn't heal.” She looked out the window, down at the royal box, where the colts and fillies from the clinic were seated. “No more ponies with legs or wings or ears or eyes that don't work.

“It won't be a perfect world, but it'll be a better one. And we're this close--” she held her hooves an inch apart. “This close to making it happen.”

The teenage stallion stood in front of the window, staring out into space at nothing. Dash could almost hear his mind churning. “This is... this is so big,” he said, laughing shakily.

“I know,” Dash said. “It's so awesome it's kinda scary.”

“Yeah... it...” He stopped speaking in mid sentence. His smile faded. “No, no, no this is bad. This is gonna be real bad.”

Rainbow Dash was taken aback. “What? Whaddya mean it's bad?” she said. She grunted as she thought she realized where he was going. “Oh you're not gonna do that ‘who wants to live forever' emo junk, are you?” She snorted. “Or going on about population density or resources or all those other egghead arguments? C'mon, we're magical alicorns living in a magical kingdom who can fly to the moon if we want to. If we can't figure out how to fix problems like that we're not even trying.”

He snorted. “Come on, give me some credit,” he said. “People being healthy, strong and living longer lives being a good thing-- that's a no-brainer, no matter what other piddly problems pop up.”

He turned away from the window. “But is Celestia thinking about what comes between?”

“Huh?”

“She's got this great idea, yeah. First step find more alicorns. Last step, everypony becomes a nigh-immortal, powerful, magical alicorn. And I'm sure she's got all sorts of plans for after that. But what kind of plans does she have for all the steps in between?” At Dash's incomprehending look he stamped his hoof. “Come on, Princess, think it through. You're on board with this, and the other princesses are on board with it, and I pretty much think it's a good idea too-- but what plan do you have for dealing with the ponies who aren't?”

Dash gave a faint shrug and looked a little sad. “Well, it's sad for them... But we're not gonna force anyone to ascend who doesn't want to...”

“And do you think that the ponies who are against it are gonna leave it at that?” he said in disbelief. “Your Highness, do you know anything about Windy City? Maybe you've missed the stories about the kind of social movements that are coming out of the Idiot Factory up on Scholar's Peak, or are running our city hall. There are groups out there who think that helping those crippled kids out there walk or fly--” he pointed out the window at the kids from the clinic-- “is a hate crime. Ponies who think that magical prosthetics-- mechanical legs, hearing aid gems, artificial eyes-- are an 'abomination of nature.' That medicine is 'unnatural' and that we should all go out and eat grass and bark or something when we get sick instead.

“But it's never enough just to live and let live. They form groups, and committees, and protest marches, and petitions and voting blocks-- and when they can't get enough petition or votes to get what they want, they'll pool their money and “donate” to politicians, and press lawsuits, to FORCE everypony to do what they want. It's how they got Big Chug soda cups and Jumbo Hayburgers outlawed here-- with the help of my idiot uncle.”
“Hayburgers are outlawed here??” Dash squawked.

He pressed on. “--And maybe Windy City is Ground Zero for control freak idiots like that, but I'll bet you a bit to a biscuit that Windy City isn't the only place you'll find 'em. There are Just SIX of you, and those kinds of ponies are freaking out already. They're already throwing protests in the streets. What do you think they're going to do when you start cranking out alicorns in bulk? What does Celestia think they'll do?”

He started pacing in a circle as he ranted. “And then there's the nobles. Maybe you missed it, but those who have power and privilege don't like to share. Once all those lords and ladies and barons and dukes and duchesses figure out there's a whole new upper class on the way, one made up of winged unicorns, one that will be even more powerful than them... they'll try to stop it.” He laughed ruefully. “And if that fails, they'll try and make sure that they're the only ones allowed to join it.

“Laws, bribes, blackmail... every little dirty trick in the book. Anything to preserve their place of power and privilege. And the hilarious thing is that the control freak idiots I mentioned before will help them. The crooked nobles will feed the ever-so-enlightened little dum-dums whatever protest sign slogan triggers them the most, bankroll their little Social Justice groups under the table, and then send them off. The useful little idiots will go out and do their dirty work for them.”

“Protests, riots, acts of treason... maybe even civil war....” he looked out the window again.

“Holy horseapples, kid, are YOU grimdark,” Dash blurted. “Where are you coming up with this stuff?”

“From what I've overheard, my guess would be 'experience,' “ Harshwhinny said cynically. Dash stared at her. “He's Fussbudget's nephew, Your Highness. He's had a very good look at what stupid people in power will do-- from the inside, and the outside.”

Dash sat there and stared at him. Everything he said, it had the painful sound of something that could all too possibly be true. “It won't get like that,” she said firmly. “Celestia, Luna, and the rest of us won't let it.”

“How?” he said scornfully. He poked at one of the ornate water globes decorating the refreshment table. “Does Princess Celestia have some secret master plan for dealing with the inevitable?”

“I don't know what she has planned,” Dash said. “But she's Celestia. She's, what, a couple thousand years old? She's seen it all. It'd be awful strange if she didn't have some idea how to deal with stupid mobs and conniving nobles. And her sister's no slouch either, for that matter. And the rest of us aren't exactly pushovers either. We'll keep things flying straight and true.”

“And what if you can't?” Mach challenged.

“Then we'll do this anyway,” Dash said. Mach twitched in surprise at her bluntness. “Mach, believe me, we talked about this. About all the things that could go wrong, and all the trouble that it would cause, and how many things that could happen that we don't know about and couldn't even guess. But we figured out fast: none of that changes anything.

“This is a good thing. This is the right thing to do. And sometimes, you just have to have faith that doing the right thing will be worth the cost.”

For a little while none of them spoke. The sun finally dropped below the horizon, the lights in the Thunderdome came up. They all silently stood at the viewing window and watched as the Wonderbolts airshow began to open.
The sun set. The stadium lights went up, glimmering off the water globes decorating the royal box and the VIP seating. Far down in the chasm in the center of the Thunderdome, lightning flashed, sending illumination stuttering up into the sky. If you were seated high enough to look down into that void, curtains of rain could be seen starting to fall.

Everypony held their breath. Then with a whoosh of skywriting smoke and the thunder of wings, the Wonderbolts began flying up from below, out of the bottomless stormcloud-chasm. A half dozen of them, a dozen, twenty, fifty, every Wonderbolt and Wonderbolt reservist on the roster in flights of five, some of them trailing smoke, some trailing sparks and fire, others trailing lightning magically dragged up on their wingtips from the rainstorm below. The nearest grouping swooped in low and flew barely a foot above the heads of those in the royal box, scattering sparks of fairy fire over them.

The cheers and applause from that section alone was deafening.

Mach looked over at Rainbow Dash. “Shouldn't you be out there? I thought this was, you know, your 'thing' as a new Princess,” he said.

Dash shrugged her wings. “This was more important. Fate of all ponykind, right? Besides, they save me for the grand finale. I can't really fly with them anymore; I'm just too far outta their league. Like, 'a Wonderbolt flying with foals from flight camp' outta their league.”

“Seriously?” Mach said skeptically.

“You ever see Celestia fly with her guards anywhere?” Mach shook his head. “No, ya don't,” Dash agreed. “You wanna know why? 'Cause she's so powerful a flier it's like trying to go jogging with a group of toddlers. It's just easier for her to let them haul her around in that chariot.”

“Well she is pretty big,” he said. “The backwash from those wings must make flying close to her kind of dicey.” Dash made a noncommittal noise of agreement. “One of those 'unforeseen consequences' you were talking about, I guess,” he went on.

Dash nodded. “Not everything's a plus,” she admitted.

Mach tore his eyes away from the formations racing through the sky and looked down to where his friends sat, in the expanded area of the royal box. If he became an alicorn, he'd gain all sorts of things... his wing stub twitched. Alicorns healed from almost anything. Could he... could he get his wing back?

But what would he lose? Would a gap open up between him and his gang? The Fools meant the
world to him; they'd been more than family for years, and he was their big brother. If he lost that, he
didn't know what he'd do.

“Huh,” Dash said. “Spitfire must’ve changed the lineup. Looks like they're opening with the ribbon
dancers.” He looked; a rectangular cloud platform was being floated into place, three smaller square
ones above and around it (and for some reason, he noted, a large thin one some twenty feet below it,
rainbow-dyed dark indigo so it disappeared against the dark of the chasm. A safety net?) Six pegasi
girls, three to a side, were standing on the main platform in dancer's poses, holding wands that trailed
glowing ribbons down to their hooves. They were groomed and coiffed in identical manestyles to
look as similar as possible, and were dressed in spangled leotards that glittered like starbursts under
the stadium lights. And standing halfway between the two groups, with her own wand held high,
was--

“Scootaloo?” Dash exclaimed.

“Rookie?” Mach exclaimed at the same time.

A wide-eyed smile spread over Rainbow Dash’s face. “Oh. My. Gosh. They went and put her in the
opening number--!”

“Holy carp, it's Rookie!” Wheezer squawked. He dove for his inhaler as exclamations of shock and
surprise went up from the Nobody's Fools. The shouts of surprise turned into cheers, whistles and
applause.

“Ermagersh,” Presto cackled. He started digging through his supplies again, pulling out a hooffull of
tiny bottle rockets. “This calls for some skywriting--!”

Scootaloo held her arabesque, wings flared, heart pounding as she waited for the music to start.
Almost against her will her eyes were pulled up to the royal boxes where her friends... her friends...

Were they still her friends? A tiny fearful sliver of ice in her heart asked. She knew what Mach One
had said... but ponies could be unpredictable, she knew that. Apologies or not, the legendary
anonymous Nobody's Fools had been busted and exposed-- because of her. By tomorrow their
names and faces would be all over the papers, their 'secret gang' of street skaters, performers and
pranksters a secret nevermore. Did they blame her for having their secret blown, for losing their
hideout? Would they ever forgive the stupid little outsider who made it happen?

There was a ruckus coming from their section. It was faint from the distance, but were they...
cheering? A moment later eight whistling pencil-thin streaks of light zipped up from where the Fools
were sitting. They cracked and popped, and eight letters formed from firework sparks floated in the
air:
The icicle in her heart melted away in an instant. She beamed; she felt as light as a balloon, as if she could just leap off the platform and float into the sky.

The music began to play, and she began to dance.

“Omigosh, look at her,” Dash said in delight. Mach could only silently agree. The moment the music had begun, the six pegasi had leapt into the air in a twirl of shining ribbons, and Scootaloo had leapt after them. She still couldn't fly, but she could hover and slow her descents to a feather fall, catching lifts and throws from the other dancers, pulling hang time out of thin air.

And what they did with that hangtime was breathtaking. It was half ballet, half gymnastics, and absolutely riveting. They leapt from platform to platform, their ribbons twirling unceasingly, writing out a swirling calligraphy in the air around them. Scootaloo was in and out and among them, sometimes mirroring their steps, sometimes counterpointing their choreography with her own. She even somersaulted through the loops of her own ribbon at one point. “Wow,” Mach muttered. The little squirt was more of a gymnast and athlete than he'd even suspected. The princess whispered something while they watched. Mach barely caught it on the edge of his hearing.

“Hang in there, Squirt. We'll get you flying yet.”

He looked down at the performing filly and realized how it must rip both their hearts out for her to be unable to fly. But with alicornhood... Alicorns could heal from almost anything. And their magic could do almost anything. He looked from her to the handicapped children from the clinic. One alicorn couldn't fix everything. But ten, a dozen, a thousand, an entire race of them... those foals could go from wheelchairs and braces to skyborne, if the ascendancy worked.

Then he looked at the Fools. Poor Presto. How much it would change his world to have a horn and wings? And Wheezer... no alicorn would be chucking down pills or potions or huffing on an inhaler. Imagine what Spritz could do with magic, instead of just paint. What Crackerjack wouldn't give to have an alicorn’s strength to go along with his scrappy courage. And would Flute be mute if he ascended?

Or maybe even Mach himself could use his alicorn powers to give him back his voice. Wouldn't that be something.

In a flash of insight, Mach realize that the ascendancy-- that the Alicorn Master Plan--- wasn't just some abstract noble cause or ideal. It was personal. He, Mach One, wasn't just some social agitator anymore. It wasn't a question of “Somebody ought to,” it was a question of “Will I?”

It was a bigger, scarier headrush than the first time he did the Kessel Run.
The music rose to a crescendo. The six ponies fluttered together, forming a pony tower, ribbons forming a spinning cloud around them. With a boost from Velvet Slipper, Scootaloo performed an aerial tumble and leapt, wings fluttering, to the peak of the formation. Their flying ribbons dissolved in a shower of sparks as the music ended.

The stadium roared.

The free-floating platforms were shaped into a ramp and floated down to the performer's entrance. Scootaloo pranced down the ramp with the others, waving at the cheering crowd. She'd never felt so euphoric. She made a beeline for the locker room, where several of the mares made a huge fuss over her, praising her performance. She shucked her sparkly leotard and carefully put it away in her panniers for safekeeping. It didn't matter that her whole part in the show wasn't even five minutes long; she was going to save that costume forever.

A quick shower, and she slapped on her panniers and winged hat, grabbed her scooter, and zoomed off to find Rainbow Dash. Didn't she say she'd be up in that fancy observation lounge right now...? She zipped past a couple of maintenance workers pushing a trolley, nearly bowling them over in her haste. “Sorry---!” he shouted an apology over her shoulder, but they were already picking themselves up and fussing over their cart's spilled contents. More of those water globe lamps all over the place, it looked like.

There was something familiar about them, she thought idly. They were both wearing baggy coveralls and hats; one was a green mare with dreadlocks, the other was a skinny looking orange stallion. Where'd she seen somepony like them before? Whatever, she thought. In the next moment she had other things on her mind, as she nearly collided headlong with Rainbow Dash, Mach One and Harshwinny going the other way. Dash snagged her in her forelimbs, bringing her to a sudden halt.

“Whoa, Squirt, where's the fire?” Dash teased.

“Didja see me, Rainbow Dash? Didja see me?” the little pegasus' glee at her debut practically lit her up from within.

“Sure did,” Dash said, giving her a noogie through her winged hat. “Opening number, no less. Pretty cool. C'mon, we're headed out to the Royal Box. I bet Prince Ajax wants to congratulate you too.”

“Shouldn't you be getting ready?” Scootaloo said.

“Right now? C'mon, the show's almost three hours long, and I don't come out till the finale. Anyway, I gotta do the Princess thing, spend some time up in the catbird seat, doing the Princess Wave--” She sat back and did a little hoof-wave, a dopey grin plastered on her face. Scootaloo laughed. “Let's go grab you a tub of popcorn and....” she paused suddenly and shuddered. “Ugh, woof.”

“What is it?” Scootaloo asked.

Dash looked around, puzzled. Everything seemed to pause for a moment. There wasn't anything to see; just a couple of maintenance ponies mucking around with a cart full of lighting equipment. She frowned, but the feeling was gone. The tableau broke; the guards shuffled, the workponies resumed picking up their spilled cargo and trundling down the hall. “Dunno, felt like a goose walked over my grave,” she muttered. “Never mind; let's go.”
“Uh, gimme a minute, I'll catch up,” Mach One said suddenly. “Oh relax, Gung Ho,” he said as the guards started to look disapproving. “I ain't gonna bolt on you. I kinda got to hit the facilities.” He nodded at a pair of doors labeled “Colts” and “Fillies.”

“Relax, guys, he's a guest, not a prisoner,” Dash said. She gave Mach a look. “We'll be in the top seats in the royal box. Don't keep us waiting too long.” With that they trotted off.

Mach availed himself of the facilities. On his way out the door his hoof clipped something; he looked down. One of the glass globes that had spilled out of the maintenance ponies' trolley had apparently rolled down the hall and bumped against the washroom door. He picked softly glowing light up, curious. Liquid sloshed around inside. *No, wait a minute; this isn't a glass globe... the liquid inside is... bubbly. And there's... a ball of ice inside?* He shook it experimentally.

He realized he'd shook it too hard when the little ball cracked. To his alarm, the globe filled with seething bubbles and began to shake. It only took him a split second to realize what it was. He and the Fools had used them for plenty of pranks... “Awww, crap, it's a mint-fizz bomb!” he said. He dropped it and backed away hastily, not wanting to get sprayed with sticky soda.

Every colt knew the gag; you dropped a mint candy into a bottle of soda water, and the soda would geyser out in a foaming fountain. He didn't know who came up with the idea of putting the mint inside an ice cube for a delayed reaction, but the Fools all agreed it was brilliant and used it every chance they got. Now it looked like the gag was on him...

The globe cracked and foaming liquid gushed everywhere---and the globe disappeared in a cloud of steam. Mach blinked in surprise. What in Equestria? He crept forward and examined the spot it had been. There was a sloppy, melted hole through the floor where the globe had been. He looked in; he could see there was a hole through the floor below. And the one below that...

Holy crap. It wasn't just soda water. It was *cloud solvent!*

Pegasus clouds, especially cloudcrete, were laced together with pegasus magic. With enough applications, they could even be made firm enough to hold up non-pegasi. But one spritz of weather factory cloud solvent and the magic came unbound. Solid walls and floors became nothing more than water vapor again, not even strong enough to hold up a gnat.

Where were those two workponies? Mach looked around frantically. The two with the trolley had hightailed it, leaving behind a trail of spilled litter, empty cleaning bottles and rags. He could hear the echoes of their rattling trolley wheels as they ran for it. “Oh no you don't!” Mach snarled, galloping after them.

The two fake workponies almost made it to the exit when they were hit by a jet black thunderbolt. They were both knocked over, their trolley was upended once again. Before they could recover Mach had them hog-tied, bound up with a roll of gaffer's tape that had bounced out of the trolley. “All right you bum-wipes,” he said, giving the skinny orange colt a shake by the collar. “*What are you doing with these?*” He held up one of the unbroken globes from the trolley.

The orange unicorn colt tried to act tough and gave him a sneer. It was like being intimidated by a gland condition. “Knocking one of the fake princesses off her high and mighty throne--” he said. Mach skipped to the chase and beat him over the head a few times with a mop bucket. When the clanging ceased, his prisoner was much more cooperative. “...shabotaging da Funderdome...” he lisped, head bobbling as his eyes crossed. “Make id aw faw down go boom, wee...”

“What??”
“That's right, royal sycophant,” the dreadlocked mare taunted. “We planted solvent bombs. All over. This floating ego trip is going DOWN.” She laughed, mocking. “The biggest one is right in front of her Royal Fakeness' throne. When they go off, that whole seating section will melt like marshmallow topping. She and all her cake-eating sycophants will be dumped out of her flying ego-palace on their gold-plated behinds in front of all Equestria. Humiliations galore.”

“Down with Sequestria,” the orange stallion said, head wobbling. “Pony to the Power... Pony... yay.”

Mach One seethed. “You IDIOTS!” he yelled. “Half the ponies in this stadium can't fly!!”

In a fury, he grabbed the remaining solvent bombs, three of them. There was a little ice tray with frozen “fuses.” He cracked them underhoof, dropped them in the globes, shook them hard, and piled them around the two bound ponies. He took a moment to relish their looks of dawning horror. “What are you doing?” the mare screeched. “You primed them! They'll go off in minutes!”

“Then you'd better hope somepony finds you before the floor disappears from under you,” Mach One snarled. He turned and ran as hard as he could, leaving the two saboteurs to slowly panic as the seconds ticked off.

He pounded up the hallway to the royal box. Guards blocked his way. He had no time; he somersaulted over them, hit the floor and kept running, ignoring the shouts behind him. He kicked the doors open-- two more guards he had to tumble past, further shouts of “Halt!”-- Rainbow Dash was sitting in her chair, Scootaloo next to her, both waving at the cheering ponies below. He hit the back of the throne in a flying kick, knocking it over and throwing both of them forward on their faces. “Agh! What gives??” Dash shouted from the floor angrily.

There it was, right under the throne. It was the size of a basketball, more than enough to turn this entire half of the stadium to a slurry of water vapor. And it was already starting to boil. There was no time left. He snatched the globe up-- he wasn't sure, he thought he managed to scream 'it's a bomb'-- tucked it in the crook of his foreleg, dodged the claws and spears of the angry guards, sprang up onto the front rail of the royal box, and leapt.

He could not fly. But even with only one wing, he could manage a few brief wingbeats, hanging air the other colts called it, literally flinging himself forward through the air on the power of his pegasus magic and the sheer strength of his one good wing. One wingbeat, he was twenty feet out from the seats, two wingbeats, now it was fifty, three wingbeats, nothing but sheer force of will-- he was hanging in the sky over the lip of the storm chasm, a thousand pony faces staring up at him slack jawed in surprise--

He took the crackling, boiling ball in both hooves and, whipping his spine around like he was snapping a whip, flung it out into open space. It sailed out over the chasm another fifty feet, then at the peak of its arc it exploded with a bang. Ponies close enough to hear it screamed. The foaming liquid sprayed everywhere-- and fell harmlessly down into the empty sky below.

He felt hooves grab him as he started to plummet after it. A couple of the performers had caught him on pure instinct. It was the oldest rule in the sky: it doesn't matter who, it doesn't matter why, catch them if they fall. “Whoa, we gotcha--” The three ponies that grabbed him hastily pulled him back and lowered him into the seats below the royal box.

Already, in mere seconds, ponies were catching the gist of what had just happened. “A bomb??”

“Did he say a bomb??”
“Guards!”

“Some sort of explosive--”

For a brief irrational second Mach One dared to think he'd saved the day. Then a stuttering volley of cracks and bangs reached his ears. The screams of panic resumed as the scores of solvent bombs scattered throughout the Thunderdome went off. “No,” he protested weakly as all around them the massive cloud structure shifted. With an ominous rumble, the leviathan cloudiseum began to come apart.

He looked around. The stadium was dotted with bursting clouds of water vapor where the bombs had gone off. Ominous rumbling came from within as the massive ring of cloudcrete began to break apart into segments, ponies frantically scrambling to avoid the growing gaps. “Buck and Pluck,” Mach swore. “They didn't just sabotage it, they made a _pizza_ out of it!”

He looked up the slope through the panicking ponies. The observation tower was slumping like a tallow candle left out in the sun; the royal box and its guest seats were coming apart like a slow-motion stack of toy blocks. Every Wonderbolt had dropped what they were doing and were flying to the rescue, catching those who were falling, depositing them on larger chunks of cloud for temporary safety. But it was chaos and the chaos was growing fast.

He saw his Fools scrambling, some looking down over the rail to him, fear on their faces. But further up, crying in fear, were the crippled kids from the Clinic....

He stood up on the backs of the bleachers. “HEADS UP, KNUCKLEHEADS!” Mach bellowed. “WHO ARE WE?” It was the old slogan, one the Fools had been shouting since before Mach had even been a member. They heard him over the growing noise, and turned to look down at him. He had to get them moving or they were dead. “I SAID WHO ARE WE!”

“Nobody's Fools,” the scattered shout came back.

“I CAN’T HEAR YOU! WHO ARE WE??”

“NOBODY'S FOOLS!” More of them joined in the shout.

AND WHAT'S RULE NUMBER ONE IF YOU'RE NOBODY'S FOOL?”

The shout came back with defiance. “NOBODY FALLS!”
“WHAT'S THAT?”

“NOBODY'S FOOLS! NOBODY FALLS!”

“YOU BETTER BELIEVE IT!” He pointed up at the frightened Clinic kids. “WE GOT SOME SPARROWS(4) UP THERE THAT NEED OUR HELP! GET UP THERE AND HELP THOSE KIDS!” That was all it took. He had it hammered into him, he'd hammered it into them; you didn't wait for somepony else to save you, or to save somepony else. You were your brother's keeper out there. And if the Maker's eye was on the sparrow, then yours damn well better be too.

They were on their hooves and moving; those with wings were airborne, those without began parkouring up the collapsing stands to where the kids were clinging for dear life. Seconds after they started moving, their astonished families realized what was going on and began moving too. The fools reached the kids and began pulling whatever gear they had in their panniers out to secure them.

Mach felt his heart swell with pride. He shook it off; time for touchy-feely crap later, this was some serious trouble. He started barking at the ponies around them. Rule Number One in a crisis, you didn't wait for someone to 'do something,' you told them what to do. “You! Any of you with wings, grab anypony near you who doesn't and get to one of the larger chunks of cloud! If you've got a horn, help the rescue crews pull the orphan clouds back in-- there are gonna be a lot of ponies grabbing on to stray puffs and drifting free if we don't. Stay together, stay in the center of the cloud masses, and stay calm!” He pulled a length of parachute cord out of his pocket, anchored it to the rail, and jumped to a rapidly dissolving clump of cloud with a panicking pair of colts on it.

He cast around frantically as he towed them, hoof over hoof, back to the larger lump of cloud. Where was the Princess--?

A flash of light high above answered his unspoken question. Princess Rainbow Dash was up and in the fight.

It hadn't taken a moment for Dash to realize what was happening and get airborne. “Get the civilians to safety,” she yelled. “I'll try and hold things together-- Scootaloo! What are you--”

“I gotta do this Dash! Nobody's Fools, NOBODY FALLS!” The filly didn't even look up; she snapped open her glider-scooter and ollied off the rail, swooping down to snag a tumbling filly out of midair. She lost altitude fast under the extra weight, but still managed to get the filly back to safety. She went airborne again, heading for another pony in distress.

“That's my girl,” Dash couldn't help saying. She rocketed skyward, her horn blazing. She cursed mentally; she still barely knew the littlest dribs and drabs of how to use alicorn magic-- for lack of any other options, she pointed her horn at the splitting clouds below and willed. A ribbon of cyan light leapt from the end of her horn and lanced down into the clouds. It began looping back and forth, literally stitching the two halves of the cloud back together. But even as she pulled the gap closed, others began to widen.
She knew what was happening; she wished she didn't. The Thunderdome wasn't just an oversized cloud castle; it was so large it was an entire weather system in itself. The cloud pillars, lightning veins, and rainbow girders that laced the interior kept it in stasis, balancing the forces inside and keeping it from spiraling out of control. But whoever had sabotaged it had used cloud solvent (she'd caught a whiff of that unmistakable grass-after-a-rain scent), which had sliced through the stabilizing interior structures like boiling water through spun sugar.

Now it was unleashed. Dash could feel the air currents with her pegasus magic, feel the updrafts and downdrafts starting to churn like a massive turbine. Her dread blossomed; if they didn't stabilize it was going to become not merely a storm but a superstorm... a tornado nearly a mile across that would tear through Lee Valley below, destroying everything in its path. And she didn't think there were enough skyworthy pegasi in Windy City to stop what had just started. It was taking every airborne pony available just to rescue the nonfliers.

Slowly, ominously, the battered Thunderdome began to rotate.

The Nobody's Fools and their families were busier than a handful of fleas on a hot skillet. Softy was doing his best to comfort some frightened foals as his father and Crackerjack's father stood on opposite sides of a split in the clouds, trying to pull it together with a tow-rope in a tug of war. Presto was laying down fresh clouds with a fire extinguisher and spraying bottled star spider silk to tie it down, while his parents struggled to neutralize the last of the cloud solvent with their magic. The entire Banana clan had taken flight to lend aid. Flute was using telekinesis to fling rope, extension cords, parachute cords from the skate rat's kits, anything to help tie down and tie together, daisy chaining the ponies together for as much safety as possible.

Fledge and his parents had flown down and were trying to airlift a hysterical donkey family to a more stable area. The two older gryphons had reached an area the Wonderbolts had cordoned as a safe zone, but Fledge was struggling to stay aloft with the young jenny clinging to him. “C'mon, just a bit further,” he grunted, flapping for all he was worth.

“Need a talon?” the thunder of wings came from above. Fledge looked up; three enormous leonine shapes were descending on him from above. Two were armed gryphon guards, the third one, wearing a cocky smile and offering an outstretched talon, was--

“PRINCE AJAX??” Fledge screeched.

“One and the same,” he said, taking the donkey foal from him. “Boy looks like he could use a lift, Peregrine,” he said. The guard on his left grabbed the exhausted Fledge and tossed him onto his own back. “Bravely done, young gryph,” Ajax said to him. “Let's get you two back to your parents.” He turned and wheeled, flapping for where his parents were perched with the rest of the donkey family.

“Prince Ajax said I was brave,” Fledge whispered. “OmigoshomigoshomiGOSHomigooosh!”
Spritz landed next to Mach One. It was getting dangerous to fly; The winds were whipping up; down in the depths of the chasm the lightning was flaring almost constantly. “Why aren't we getting these groundpounders down to earth?” he shouted over the wind and thunder. The stadium lights began to blow out and go dark, their poles cracking and falling. Ponies screamed.

“It wouldn't do any good,” Mach shouted back. “We'd be dead meat before we reached the ground!”

“Why?” Spritz shouted, baffled. Storm was in sky, not on ground, ground safer, went his thinking.

“Th--this isn't just a storm,” Wheezer shouted. He was curled up on floor next to them, clinging to the rails and to his mother for dear life. “In a c-c-cloud formation this s-si-size catasstro-strophic failure leads to--”

“Small words, science nerd!” Spritz yelled, exasperated.

“Chain reaction!” Wheezer yelped. “It's not just a storm, it's a supercell! It's going to turn into the biggest cyclone you've ever seen in your life! We try and air-lift ponies down now, we'd be torn apart!”

“What do we do??” Spritz said, panicking.

“We hang on,” Mach said, looking up to where Dash was wrestling with the entire storm alone with her magic. “And we better pray our Princess is half as awesome as she thinks she is!”

Rainbow Dash strained with all her might. Her horn blazed like a firebrand; lightning crackled off her wingtips as she threw both her unicorn magic and her pegasus weather powers into trying to tame the growing storm. It was a losing fight and she knew it; Celestia herself couldn't tame a supercell on her own, and Rainbow Dash was no Celestia. But still she fought on.

Spitfire powered her way to where the Princess hovered, wings churning against the wind to bring her close. Stray ribbons of St. Elmo's fire singed her wings. “It's no use, Dash!” she shouted. “You can't stop it alone!”

“Then-- we need-- t-to wrangle it!” Dash shouted back, teeth gritting against the backlash feeding through her magic from the storm. “Get a team, start a counter-rotation--”

“There's not enough ponies in the whole stadium for that!”

“Try it anyway! It's all we got!” Dash ordered. “DO IT!” Spitfire saluted, wheeled and dove, letting the wind carry her away. In minutes Dash saw her leading as many wings as she could find, a flight of gnats against a whirlwind, diving down through the eye of the storm to reach the lower layers and start flying counter-clockwise, trying to unwind the forces aligning against them.

A pegasus foal was ripped free from the cloud surface by a torrent of wind, his wings buzzing frantically as he tried to change his fate. Scootaloo's glider, shaking in the crosswinds, dove and snatched the tiny colt out of the air. She had just tossed him back to safety when her luck finally ran out; one of the stadium lights, ripped loose by the wind, fell from the sky and struck her a glancing
blow on the head. Stunned, she and her glider went tumbling out into the void.

“Scootaloo! NOOOO!” Dash had seen it. But she couldn't do a thing! If she broke her spell and dove to save her, the storm would surge out of control--

She wasn't the only one who saw. Mach stared in horror as the gutsy little rookie went tumbling like a leaf down into the maw of the storm. He looked up. Dash's anguished eyes met his own.

“Nobody falls,” he muttered. He snapped his one good wing tight to his side... and leaped.

When Scootaloo came to, she was tumbling over and over, all alone in a wind torn void. She struggled to right herself, managed for a brief moment, looked up through the funnel cloud and realized where she was. She was in the storm. She was falling! She screamed in terror, legs flailing, wings buzzing--

High above, a tiny black dot began approaching. The dot grew till it was Mach One, diving muzzle first through the air like a jet black arrow. In moments he had closed distance with her and had wrapped his hooves around her. “What are you doing? Now we're both gonna go splat!” she screeched.

“Well then,” he shouted back. “I guess one of us better learn to fly really quick!”

High above the storm, Dash was in anguish. She'd just watched as first her little honorary sister, then the brave colt that had befriended her, had fallen into the vortex of the storm. And she was helpless to stop it!

Her body was in almost as much agony as her heart. She was relying on brute force, not magical talent or know how, to try to wrangle the storm. If she'd gotten a little further in her studies, she might have understood the concept of *thaumic backlash*. As it was, she was starting to figure it out the hard way; if magic could be used to push raw power into material objects, then it only followed that pushing back would force raw power the other way. There were ways to avoid this.... ways she had not learned. She was slowing the storm, but at the cost of massive amounts of power being forced into herself, making her magical reserves strain to hold it all in.

All that power had to go somewhere--

Why did he jump after her? Why did he look at her, like she knew what the crazy---

The crazy nascent alicorn...

Even with the fire in her veins the epiphany gave her goosebumps. “Oh Celestia I hope this works..” She looked up to the sky and poured all the backed-up power into her horn.

"From one to another, another to one.

From all of us together,
To each of us together,

and one shared by all without end--"
No one was there to see as the tiny filly, hanging suspended in space, surrounded by the raging storm, arched her back and blazed white. They would have been speechless if they had. There was a flash, and Scootaloo disappeared.

The storm was raging--- then she was floating through an endless space filled with stars-- the strings of the cosmos sang...

No.. I don't have time to hang around here! Scootaloo thought-- and she was back in the heart of the storm, plummeting headfirst, straight down like a shooting star.

The catastrophe of the Thunderdome had not gone unnoticed by those on the ground. The donkeys, zebras, ponies, and zonkeys of Lee Valley hadn't needed any long explanations about what was happening when the winds began to rise and the enormous stadium shading their valley had suddenly begun to swell and roar with thunder. Every farmer worth two beans saw the vast funnel cloud slowly dropping down and had immediately headed for their storm shelters, dragging their panicking families behind them. It was still yet to touch down but nopony intended to stay around to see that.

So it so happened that only one donkey in the valley saw what happened next. Eli was the last one into his storm cellar; he stuck his head out one last time to make sure nopony was out there running for cover. At that precise moment a streak of golden-orange fire had come screaming down from the swirling black sky above. It halted mere meters above the ground and resolved itself into an orange alicorn filly, glowing, no blazing from within with unimaginable power. She hung there over Eli's fields, wings flapping steadily, pencil-thin ribbons of lightning trailing from the tips of her feathers, staring at him with burning lavender eyes--- then rocketed back up into the sky, vanishing into the heart of the storm.

Eli closed and barred the cellar door. He went to join his family. “What was that light, Eli?” his wife asked fearfully.

It would take him some time to think of how to answer her.

It was too much for Rainbow Dash to take. That surge of raw magical power passing through her had left her devastated in its wake. It felt, in her own rather colorful terms, like she had just swallowed and then passed an entire watermelon whole---while sticking her tongue in a lightning jar. Her magic sputtered out and she staggered through the air to collapse on a perilously unstable scrap of cloud, her nerves twitching and her feathers smoking. She lay there panting, trying to pull herself together.

A chord strummed across the cosmic strings. Dash raised her head up. “....Scootaloo …?”
Scootaloo couldn't believe how alive she felt. Alive Alive Alive. She was buzzing, vibrating with energy. And she could feel. She finally understood what all her flight instructors and doctors and everypony had been telling her about her pegasus wings. She could sense everything around her, her sense of touch in her wings extending seamlessly out in every direction. She could feel this storm, all of it, down to the last breeze, the last wisp of moisture in the clouds, the lightning streaking through it, and the looming power of lightning yet to come, caged up inside it waiting to spring--- she understood this titanic thing of weather the way she understood the feel of her own feathers, the back of her own hoof....

She could feel the Other. The one still on the threshold like she had been-- he was trapped in the storm, swept helplessly up in its circling winds. The spell that had transformed her was not finished; it was still inside her, a burgeoning static charge waiting to ground out. She knew what to do.

With a voice that buzzed and hummed with eldritch power, she spoke.

"From one to another, another to one.
From all of us together,
To each of us together,
and one shared by all without end---"

Like a bolt of lightning, the magical surge she had been containing leapt out, piercing into the howling stormwinds, and struck its mark.

Mach One awoke--- he fell through darkness filled with stars...

No--- The storm-- they need me--

Then he was back, into the fury of the storm winds. Without a conscious thought, running on the pure instinct that had flowed into him with the magic, he spread his wings and flew.

He burst from the wall of the storm into its heart. He found himself circling, with Another circling opposite him. The magic still crackled high in both of them; what passed between them was without words.

The storm. We must stop it., She thought.

They are trying, He replied, already knowing of the Wonderbolts striving to unravel the storm, of the Princess trying to hold it back by sheer force.

She spread her wings, sensing, feeling. She could sense every aspect of the storm now, on a level that was literally pre-verbal... even the efforts of the Wonderbolts trying to turn the storm back.

No, that won't work! She said. In a flash she impressed on him what she had sensed. At its most primitive and simple, a cyclone, even a gigantic one, was easy to understand; an imbalance of forces, cold dry air pressing down on warm, moist air, till it finally broke through, forming a funnel and
destroying everything in its path on the ground till the pressure finally eased. The funnel was how balance between the earth and sky was restored. They didn't need to make the funnel slow down---they needed to make it go faster.

*Follow me.* She began to fly not against, but with the wind. In wordless agreement he nodded, his eyes burning white. The two began to circle, flying with the wind, as fast as the wind, faster, faster still...

Lightning Dust considered herself lucky. She'd been been given a second chance with the Wonderbolts, a tentative, very tentative probationary period on the reserve roster--- down at the end of the bench. When the call had come in for every active and reserve member to join up for the big new show the new Princess was running in Windy City, she thought her luck would never get better.

She was seriously debating on if she was really lucky at all at the moment. Some lunatics had sabotaged the new stadium, collapsing its stabilizers and setting off a chain reaction that had turned the oversized structure into a rapidly growing super-storm. Which she, along with every other oh-so-lucky idiot in the Wonderbolts, was trying to stop by flying against the circling winds. They had about as much chance of stopping a mile-wide cyclone like this as a flock of moths!

But she wouldn't quit. None of the others would either. The only other option was to stand back and let a killer storm rip through a valley full of innocent farmers and their families--

There was a flash to her left. Squinting against the storm even with her goggles, she looked over her shoulder to see what it was. Something... two somethings... were circling in the eye of the storm, flying clockwise with the wind, not against it, glowing too bright and too fast for her to see what they were. Then they were flying too fast to see, period-- a ring of blazing light, a spiral, a pillar---

*Holy crap*, Lightning Dust realized. Whatever they were, they were forming a second funnel inside the first!

*Fall out, everypony fall out* their wing lead signaled back. As one the Wonderbolts barrel rolled right, pulling out of the cloudwall and outside the storm. They flew back up through the cloudcover and emerged topside to regroup.

The second funnel stretched up out of the mouth of the first and up into the sky, a corkscrew of rainbow fire. It grew narrower and higher as they watched, and if Lightning Dust were any judge, was spinning even faster. The moan of the winds was being drowned out by the higher pitched whistle of the bizarre new whirlwind. “What are they doing? They're making it worse!” somepony shouted.

“No, no look,” came the answer. “It's working-- they're pulling the larger funnel in!” The speaker was right; the larger funnel cloud was constricting, growing narrower. *They're bleeding it off,* Lightning Dust realized. *They're making it suck the warm air up from the ground faster, dispelling the storm's power at the source.*

*Whoever or whatever “they” are.*
The howl of the wind rose to a scream. The outer funnel merged with the inner, pulling away from the remains of the stadium; the islands of clouds covered with desperate ponies slowed their circling. With a final earshattering thunderclap the funnel disappeared, the clouds left behind floating serene and still.

Far below, a gentle rain began to fall.

There was a breathless silence. Then ponies by the thousands began to cheer. The Wonderbolts began embracing and slapping each other on the back. “We did it, we did it!” somepony shouted.

“I don't think WE did anything,” Lightning Dust heard Spitfire say. “Where's the Princess?”

For a miracle, many of the magical lamps that had lit the stadium were still functional. Some were even still standing on their poles. They lit up the cloudscape, revealing the Princess lying on a mere rag of cloud and looking seriously frazzled. The Wonderbolts flew to her aid. Ajax and his men did as well. “What in the name of all the tribes was that?” the gryphon prince said, amazed.

“Are you all right, Dash?” Spitfire said.

Dash sat up, looking around shakily. “Mach? Scootaloo?” she croaked.

Spitfire started to speak, then hesitated. But before she could get a word out, something burst up through the center of the cloud cover where the terrible stormfunnel had once been. The trailing clouds fell away to reveal an alicorn stallion soaring wide-winged up into the sky. He pulled a gentle loop and landed, three-hooved, a few strides away from where Rainbow Dash lay gathering her wits. “Mach?” she said.

“The one and only.” the grinning colt said. He hobbled forward, a sleeping Scootaloo cradled in his forelimb, her stubby horn resting against his collarbone. On her hip were a pair of white wings set within an overlapped circle and square and surrounded by a golden laurel. He chuckled. “Guess she's tuckered out,” he said. “She's gonna flip her lid when she wakes up and sees that cutie mark....”

Dash stared. He was a couple of inches taller now, and still woefully lanky, with a fairly long, thin spiral horn rising from his forehead. His formerly short-cropped mane and tail had grown out and now hung in gently curling locks. He was pure jet black, coal black, INK black now rather than the dark grey-black he had been before. And he had two wings now, with which he was gently fanning the breeze. One was the same inky black as the rest of him.

The other was clear as crystal, and sparkled in the stadium light.

1) In ponies, the hooves, feathers, and horn are all magically conductive... and so is their hair. This is how, for instance, Applejack is able to use her tail as a prehensile appendage to manipulate a lasso, why Twilight's mane kinks and frizzes when she is stressed, and Pinkie Pie's mane can go from curly to limp and straight when she is depressed. When a pony speaks of being so frightened their hair stands on end, they're being far more literal than you think.

2) We don't know how plumbing and sewage work in cloud buildings, and we do not want to know. We are just thankful that it works.
3) Mayor Fussbudget still checked all the sodas in his fridge by poking them with a yardstick.

4) Skate Rat lingo for anyone wounded, stranded, or in danger.

5) Before you ask why a giant raincloud would have fire extinguishers on it, try to remember: this was Windy City, land of the busybody bureaucrat and home of the pointless safety regulation. This was the city first to put “warning: may contain nuts” on bags of pistachios.

6) Many ponies would recall with bemusement how they were carried to safety by a pegasus colt wearing an enormous day-glow tie, and carrying a filly on his back who repeatedly yelled “Banana Power!” with every rescue.
Chapter 51

Mach One felt the morning sun shining on his face. He frowned, grunted, and after a long lazy struggle finally gave in to the inevitable and opened his eyes. After several seconds of squinting and cursing at the sunlight streaming through the window right into his eyes, his vision finally adjusted. He squinted at the room around him.

He was certainly not in his room back at Great Granny's little shack. (cozy, but a little cramped for a little old mare, a dozen cats and one growing boy.) And he wasn't at the basement hideout. For one thing he was pretty sure neither of those places had beds with king sized cloud mattresses with mountains of springtime fresh pillows and sky blue cotton sheets set out in the middle of luxuriously appointed suites...

He rolled over and nearly had a heart attack when he found himself staring into Flute's wide eyes. “GAH! Flute---” He grunted. “Don't sit so close to the side of someone's bed! I..” Further recriminations were postponed as the unicorn colt began pronking in place in excitement. Flute looked back over his shoulder at the door. Mach saw his horn light up. “Oh no, Flute, don't--"

BLAAAAAAAT!

“aAUGh!” The shock of a vuvuzuela going off next to his ear sent Mach nearly tumbling off the far side of the bed. He untangled himself from the sheets and got ready to tear a strip off of Flute for doing that, but the colt had already run from the room, his horn blatting away full blast. Mach could hear ponies shouting oaths and complaints. “I hate it when he does that,” he groused. “Tell him to wake somepony up, what does he do? Bells? Chirping birds? Nooooo....” almost on cue he heard the little fourlegged foley board switch over to a rooster call. Of course.

In the next moment, a small army came bombing in. Or maybe an air force, considering the percentage of pegasi. Every one of the Nobody's Fools crowded into the room, yammering questions and shouting till they couldn't be heard over one another. Trailing behind them came a pegasus nurse and a silver-maned unicorn wearing a doctor's coat and a stethoscope.

Mach could see the doctor was trying to speak over the din. He sat up and tried to be heard. “Guys--GUYS!... Flute?” Flute took the cue.

FWEEEEET!

After Flute's earsplitting imitation of a steam whistle, everypony fell silent. “Thanks Flute. I think,” Mach said, rubbing his ears. “You were saying, Doc?”

“Ahem. My name is Doctor Hospice Care,” the doctor said. “And I suppose it falls to me to be the first to say, welcome to the wonderful world of alicornhood.”

Mach's jaw raised and lowered a few times. “I—” his hoof went to his forehead, finding the base of his new horn immediately. He carefully felt out along it's length. “Oh, my... it... last night... it wasn't a dream--” He started to look and feel himself over, hyperventilating just a little. “I'm an alicorn? An...” Then his hooves stopped. At his wing stub.

The confusion and disappointment on his face was devastating. “I don't understand,” he said. His eyes were not watering. They were NOT watering. “I... I flew. I had two wings-- I remember--”

Presto edged closer to the bed. “I, uh, I think I can explain that one,” he said, smiling uncertainly. “Stretch out your wings.”
“But I can't--”

“No. Just... close your eyes, okay?” Still confused and upset, Mach complied. “Now, try to remember how your wings felt last night. Both of them. How the joints moved, and the muscles, and how the feathers fit over each other. You got that in your head?” Mach nodded. It was bizarre, he could almost feel the missing wing. “Okay, now... stretch out your wings.”

Mach obeyed. The room exploded into cries of amazement. He opened his eyes. His wings were stretched out on either side of him; on one side, a wing of flesh and blood and bone and feather. On the other, a shimmering, crystal-clear wing, etched out of thin air like cut glass. He couldn't help himself. He flapped them, experimentally. Then he flapped some more, slowly lifting himself off the bed till his head bumped against the ceiling. He lowered himself back down to the bed, wings fanning gently.

“It's just as I thought,” Presto breathed in wonder. “A wing, a phantom limb, made out of pure magic... may I...?” he reached out a hoof to touch.

“EEE! Bad Touch! I need a grownup!” Foster shouted in a loud falsetto.

Presto jerked back his hoof as if he'd been scalded, then swatted the amateur comedian three or four times. “You jerk!” The tension in the room vanished as everypony broke up laughing.

“So, Mister.... Mach One is it? How are you feeling?” Doctor Hospice said.

Mach took a breath, trying to steady himself. “I have wings,” Mach said shakily. “I... I can fly. It's gonna be kinda hard to beat that feeling.” He held his breath and bit his lip, afraid he might fall apart if he said more. The Fools knew their cue; they fell on him in a mob, wrapping him in a group hug—interspersed with plenty of friendly jeers and manly back-slapping, of course. No need for it to get all weird.

Doctor Hospice finally managed to elbow his way in and began going over Mach with his magic and his stethoscope. His nurse went around the other side and began checking his pulse and blood pressure. “Now, seriously-- how are you feeling?” he asked.


“You kinda scared us,” Softy said, looking (pretty much as always) fretful and worried. “I mean, you passed out.”

Foster started cackling again. “Yeah, epic entrance there, Peerless Leader,” he said. “You come in for a landing all like--” he struck a pose, wings flared. “'Behold your new Alicorn Prince!' and then- -FWUMP. Faceplant, right into the cloudpack,” he chortled. The others started snickering.

“Really?” Mach groaned.

“Snout down, wings out flat, butt in the air,” Crackerjack confirmed. The others broke up laughing again. “Hail the conquering hero.”

Mach groaned and decided to change the subject. He did not want to think about how that was probably in every newspaper in Windy City by now.

Every newspaper. He and the Fools had saved thousands of lives. Holy cow. He shook his disbelief off and tried to focus. “Doc? I don't understand about... about my wing,” he said. “Why....?” He flexed his translucent wing by way of explanation.
“Hm. Can you, um, dispel your wing for a moment?” Doctor Hospice said. It took Mach a moment, but he eventually figured out which 'brain muscle' to flex and the wing dissipated into nothing. Doctor Hospice came in close and peered closely at Mach's wing stub. “Mmm hmmm, thought so. Take a look,” he said. Mach craned his neck around and peered at his stump, his eyes almost crossing. It looked a little different, almost-- jointed. And there on the end were two tiny pinfeathers.

“I figured as much,” Doctor Hospice said. “When Dash brought me aboard the ship to consult, she loaded me up with the medical files on all the recent ascendants. There's at least one other ascendant whose development is, well, asymmetrical. In their case, despite being fully adult they started as a unicorn, and their wings are still immature and growing. In your case, it seems the regenerative properties of alicorns is going to grow you a new wing.... but only at a slow, careful pace.”

"Alicorns can regenerate?" Mach One blinked at that.

"Of course. For an immortal it's practically mandatory," the Doctor said. "Otherwise after a few hundred years, much less the thousands attributed to Princess Celestia and Luna, they would accumulate, well, physical defects: scars, bone spurs, microfractures, mis-healed tissues... they would eventually be a walking mass of aches, pains and old injuries."

“So why didn't the magic do it all at once?” Spritz butted in.

“Because he had more urgent things to do at the time than floating around in the celestial plane, growing a wing,” Doctor Hospice said with a hint of amusement. “You both spent mere moments on the celestial plane, just long enough to complete the basics of your metamorphosis, then you dove back into the material world to battle the superstorm, relying on a 'phantom limb' to fill in.” He shrugged. “It just means you'll have to wait for your natural alicorn regeneration to produce the flesh and blood wing. It'll be slower than floating around a cosmic plane for a couple of hours, but one can hardly complain.”

Mach started. “Rookie!” he said. “Doc-- Scootaloo-- is she--”

“She's fine, she's fine,” the doctor said. “She's just still sleeping, as you were. Tuckered her out a bit more, I suspect, as she's younger than you. She's in Princess Dash's cabin.”

“Cabin? Where are we?” Mach blinked.

“On board the Princess's ship, the Thunderstreak, mah brony,” Zonk said with a grin. “It was the only place we could take you that the press wouldn't be scaling the walls with climbing ropes.”

“We did have to blast a few pegasus reporters with water bombs as it is,” Fledge said.

He got to his hooves. “You through, Doc? What's the verdict?”

“I think 'Fit as a fiddle' sums it up,” Doctor Hospice said. “You'll want to up your calcium and protein-- you've got bones and muscle to grow yet.”

Mach's stomach growled. “Yeah, that sounds about right. But first--- where's Scootaloo?”
Scootaloo's eyes blinked open. She realized almost immediately where she was. She was in her cabin.... no. She was in Rainbow Dash's cabin, back on the Thunderstreak. Someone had brought her back, tucked her in bed... and her panda doll was with her. She snuggled it, relieved-- in all the chaos the night before she'd lost track of it.

*The night before...*

She sat up, wide awake, her heart pounding. The air show. The explosions. The storm. That space full of stars-- no. It couldn't have been real. Not all of it. It was all too crazy to... Carefully, almost fearfully, she started feeling herself over. Omigosh, a horn.

And her wings-- they felt--

No, they really felt. They seemed so *sensitive*. She stretched them out... were they larger? They felt like it. For years she'd listened to other pegasi talk about “feeling” the air around them; for the first time she understood. The instant she spread her wings it was like opening a whole new set of eyes. She could sense the air all around her, she could feel every little zephyr and draft in the room, all at once, as if the very air in the room was an extension of her body. She flapped experimentally; she could feel the invisible vortexes rolling off the tips of her wings. So *this* was what they meant. Was this what it was like for Rainbow Dash, and all the other pegasi?

Dash's mirror cabinet was standing beside the bed. Shakily, she got down off the cloudy mattress, went over and opened it, folding the leaves out. It wasn't broadcasting now, so all she saw was her own reflection. She stared at herself. There it was, a horn peeping out through her forelock. It looked about like Sweetiebelle's. And yes, her wings *were* a bit larger. And on her flank--

Her breath caught in her throat. Wings, a laurel wreath... “Omigosh,” she squeaked. She tore her eyes away from her cutie mark-- eeeeeeee!--- and locked eyes with her reflection. “Okay, stay cool,” she whispered. “Stay... cool.” She held her breath.

She was an alicorn.

She had her cutie mark.

She couldn't *possibly* go three for three--

She started flapping her wings. And it was so *easy*. She could feel the air, and the air did what she told it to. She lifted off the floor and hovered. She turned and flew a lap around the room, then another. She hovered over the bed, just hanging time, a thousand emotions running under her skin.

A door creaked. Scootaloo turned in midair. It was Rainbow Dash, standing in the front door. She'd obviously been standing there watching for some time. She was smiling and her eyes were shining. “Hey, squirt,” she said softly. “'Sup?”

She said the first dumb thing that popped into her head. “Hey Dash,” Scootaloo laughed and hiccuped. “I got my cutie mark....” She wiped her face with her foreleg, why were her eyes watering, why was it so hard to see--? She flew, literally really flew, into Dash's embrace, colliding with her chest with a thump. Dash squeezed her tight enough to pop. Scootaloo started blubbering like a baby, it was so humiliating but she just couldn't stop, big fat tears rolling down her face in a torrent. “I can *fly*, I can *fly*, I can *fly*, I can *fly*...”

There was a loud sniffle. Scootaloo lifted her face from where it was buried in Dash's shoulder and looked. Mach One and the Fools were all standing in the hallway, jammed together, trying to look through the door. There wasn't a dry eye to be seen. “Hey. None of you saw me crying, got it?” she
sobbed, giving them all a weepy smile.

There was another sniffle and a honk. The Fools parted; standing behind them was Harshwhinny, kerchief in hoof and mascara in a state of ruination. “If they tell on either of us I'll deny it in a court of law,” she informed Scootaloo severely.

The Fools poured into the room. For the second time that day one of them got mobbed in a mass group hug... with maybe a few less manly back-slaps.

“The saboteurs-- did you catch them??” Mach said.

Harshwhinny gave him a condemning look. “Yes. They're claiming you'd tied them up, surrounded them with floor-melting bombs and left them to die.”

“Uh, yeah. That's true.” There was a moment's horrified silence. The Fools all stared at him with shocked expressions... till they noticed he was struggling to suppress an evil smirk. “And how long did it take them to notice the parachute cord I'd tied to both their ankles?”

It took them a moment to get it. “Oh MAN,” Zonk hooted.

“Probably right up to the moment they hit the end of the slack,” Harshwhinny said drolly. “They were dangling upside down from a chunk of the Thunderdome's superstructure, flapping like scalded chickens and screaming their heads off. They had to be treated for badly sprained ankles, but other than that-- and possible lifelong trauma-- they're fine.” She put a mark on a clipboard and looked up.

“How did you know that the bombs wouldn't dissolve what you'd anchored the parachute cords to?”

“I didn't,” Mach said, his voice a little cold. “But I figured I was giving them more of a chance than they gave a whole stadium full of innocent ponies.” He shrugged. “besides, they were tied together and the mare's wings were unbound. Not my fault if the dum dums forgot she could fly.”

Dash laughed her tail off. Harshwhinny gave both the Princess and the new Prince a sour look. “Hmph. I think we'll leave that bit out of the official press release,” she said dryly.

“Press release?” Scootaloo said.

“You have your epic whirlwind to unravel, I have mine,” Harshwhinny said, raising an eyebrow and her clipboard. “Mine is being whipped up right now by spin doctors.”

“Yeah,” Dash groaned. “Can't bail till the cleanup's done. How bad was Lee Valley hit?”

“Actually,” said a voice in the doorway, “I'm here to drop a report on that.” Spitfire stepped halfway in and leaned against the doorframe. “Whoa, big crowd.... anyway, Your Rainbowness, Lee Valley is actually looking pretty good.”

“Really?” Dash said in disbelief.

“Yeah. Most of the farmers got scared outta their stripes by the windstorm, but we-- or well YOU,” she pointed at Mach and Scootaloo, “broke it up before any major damage was done. Right now they're getting a nice steady series of rainshowers, just like they had backlogged. They're all happy as
Princess Pinkie in a pie-eating party. They're sending their thanks and compliments.”

“Oh wow, that's good.” Dash paused. “But compliments?”

“Yeah, apparently Squirt here put on a lightshow in Lee Valley when she ascended,” Spitfire grinned. “Folks are all talking about a junior Wonderbolt trailing wings of lightning and covered in flame. They thought it was part of the air show. Hah!”

“I sorta remember that...” Scootaloo said thoughtfully.

“So long as they're happy,” Dash said. “I don't think I could deal with a whole valley of farmers whizzed off at me.”

“They might be a little cheesed at all the junk that got dumped on 'em,” Foster noted. “Not everything in the Thunderdome was made out of clouds, you know.”

“Ouch. I guess we'll be writing a lot of apology letters...”

Eli stood in his fields, bareheaded, rain pattering on his smiling upturned face. He was getting drenched to the bone and he didn't care a lick. The watermelon crop was saved. Just a handful of hours before it looked like all had been doomed; now, thanks to the Princesses, this one poor donkey's farm would see another year.

On top of that, he and several of his neighbors found themselves picking a secondary windfall crop out of their fields and trees, thanks to the odds and ends that enormous storm had dropped out of its belly on them.... clothes, tools, the odd box of supplies.. Zekiel was now the proud owner of a box of 144 bog rolls, and Widow Hepzibah down the road was ecstatic over the half-dozen stadium lights, totally undamaged, that had landed in one of her hay bales. She was talking up a storm about how she was going to rig them up in her new greenhouse.

His little girl, a zonkey hinny, was running up and down the farm, splashing in the puddles and doing a wild midsummer rain dance. Her mother would throw a fit about it later... bah, let the girl play. It wouldn't do any harm. Muddy hooves and muddy clothes could be washed.

“Pa!” she suddenly called out. Eli quit his woolgathering and trotted round the barn to see what the matter was. Minnie was standing under the old cherry tree, staring up into the branches. “Pa, what was this all about?” she said. Eli looked up in the tree. Dangling from the branches were a half a dozen or so sodden, tattered dolls.

Bemused, Eli stood on his hind legs and carefully pulled them down. Minnie took each one and gently set together on a nearby stone. She cradled the last one. “Aww,” she said. “How did this happen to the poor li'l things?”

“Somepony musta lost 'em in the storm,” Eli said, nodding skyward at the ragged remains of the Thunderdome. Probably him and a lot of his neighbors would be picking some mighty odd things off their treetops and rooftops this week.

Minnie hesitated. “I guess we'll need to find who belongs to 'em, then,” she said. It didn't take a
smart pony to hear the regret in her voice.

Eli rolled the pipe in his mouth to the other side and regarded his daughter. “Might clean 'em an' patch 'em up a bit first,” he said. “An' I reckon they might need somepony to look after 'em till we find whomever lost 'em.” The suggestion was a bit thick.

Minnie smiled eagerly and hugged the sodden plush. “Oh, I kin do that,” she said.

Eli chewed on his pipe stem and tried not to laugh. Oh well, he thought. Hopefully this mystery owner will be willing to swap for a couple of ripe melons.

Harshwhinny's lips compressed into a thin line. “It's going to be a very busy week. Damage to clean up, compensation to be decided, the saboteurs to be dealt with, reimbursements made for the cancelled shows--” Dash groaned at this one. “In brief... we're going to be in Windy City for a while.”

“Well, for now what's first?” Dash said. Then she facehoofed. “Oh doi--- I gotta contact the others! They gotta want to know about all this.” She pulled her compact out of her peytral and flipped it open.”Scuse me everypony.” She stepped off to the side and began talking into the compact's mirror. “Hello? Applejack? ... Hey AJ, where were you? I tried all last night to reach you guys...”

“Well, let's see what's next on the agenda--” Harshwinny said. She was interrupted by a loud rumble. Mach looked sheepish.

“Uh, maybe breakfast?” he said. “The boys and I could probably use some grindage.”

“Ooo, yeah, now that you mention it I'm starving,” Scootaloo said. There was a chorus of agreement from the other youngsters in the room.

“Couldn't any of you use room service?” Harshwinny said.

“Well yah, we tried using that bell-horn thingy to call down to the kitchen,” Spritz said. “But when we tried to order a pizza the chef guy started crying and screaming at us.”

“in Prench,” Crackerjack added.

Scootaloo's eyebrows tabled. “Yeah, Chef Fancy Schmancy is like that,” she said. “Really, Harsh, do we really need him?”

“If you want to host state dinners that aren't catered by Chef Boy-ar-dee,(*) yes,” Harshwhinny said. “I'll see what I can do...”

Dash overheard this. “It's cool,” she said over her shoulder. “Ajax went out to track down a Burger Barn with that gryphon kid.”

You could have heard a pin drop (or you would have, if not for the cheers from the peanut gallery at the promise of greasy repast.) Harshwinny looked at Dash, aghast. “You sent the Royal Prince and emissary of the Gryphon kingdom on a burger run??”
“Well, he offered,” Dash said defensively. “His airship is parked right next to ours, and--”

Harshwhinny groaned and covered her eyes. “I work for a mare who can turn breakfast into an international incident,” she said faintly.

“Hey, now I...-- oh forget it. I'm busy.” Dash snorted and turned back to her mirror. “So why the heck were you guys-- wait. Applebloom what?”

The Burger Barn on Scholar's peak was accustomed to a lot of exotic foot traffic. Being practically at the very foot of the Academy, the staff there had served brilliant (and not so brilliant) scholars and professors, researchers, politicians of every level of power, and the scions of countless noble houses.

This went a long way in explaining why the gryphoness behind the register was singularly unimpressed with the fact that the crown prince of the Griffon kingdom was currently flirting with her. “Sir,” she sighed, giving him a not-so-longsuffering look, “please, if you are not going to place a serious order--”

“I'm stone cold serious, beautiful,” the gryphon leaning against her counter said with what he obviously thought was a winning smile. “Fifty double jumbo soyburgers,(1) fifty Celestia-size orders of fries, fifty Celestia-size Big Gulp sodas-- you know what, just give me the cups and put the soda in some gallon jugs, that'll be easier to carry---a hundred of those little hot bubbly fruit pies, half apple, half cherry....”

“We're sorry sir,” the cashier gryphoness droned, with the air of a gryphon who had to repeat this WAY too many times. “But due to city ordinances passed by Mayor Fussbudget, restaurants within the city limits are forbidden to serve any burger larger than a quarter pound, fries larger than 'small' or any soda bigger than eight ounces--- and you can pretty much forget the hot bubbly pies,” she finished with an air of disgust.

Ajax didn't turn a feather. “Aww, c'mon,” he teased. “You can't bend the rules a bit for one of the heroes of the Thunderdome terrorist attack?”

The cashier girl's eyes widened a bit, but her cynical mask quickly settled back over her face. “Look... Your Majesty.... we've had ponies, gryphons and zonkies in and out all day from that disaster, so I'm sure you probably had a talon in the rescue work going on.” She pointed out the window where emergency weather crews could be seen streaking across the sky, in and out of the weather factory, then waved at the customers, a large portion of which were wearing hard hats and orange vests. “I'm not the sort of chick who gets impressed by some guy blowing his own horn.”

“Who said anything about me?” Ajax reached behind him, picked up Fledge, and plunked the gryphon pup on the counter. Fledge gave the cashier girl a wide eyed nervous smile.

“Meep,” he said.

The cashier girl blinked in surprise. “You?-- Fledge, right? You were in that mess?”

“Better believe he was,” Ajax said. “This young gryph and his friends were flying to the rescue not sixty seconds after the saboteur's bombs went off. He helped save a lot of lives. Saw him snatch a
little hinny nearly big as him from certain doom and fly her to safety.” Fledge simply sat there, turning red.

“Oh no way.” She said, wide eyed. Wordlessly, Ajax accepted a newspaper from one of his stoic guards, and turned it over so she could see the front page image. Under a blazing full-width headline was a full-color photo. It had been snapped at the perfect angle, catching a handful of the rescuers at work in the storm lashed night. You could see a couple of Wonderbolts and of the Fools and even Ajax's gryphon guards in the background, and right in the foreground was Fledge, in mid swoop, claws out to a foal whose hooves were stretched out to him for help.

“Oh my gawwwsh! This little guy?” The cashier's eyes went wide and her face lit up as she grabbed the newspaper. “OmiGAWWSH-- Can I have this? Oh I gotta show the others this!” Job forgotten, she ran into the back through the swinging doors, waving the paper. “Girls, you ain't gonna believe who's in the paper--”

Prince Ajax caught Fledge's eye and gave him a smug grin. “And now we know why you said that this was your favorite Burger Barn in Windy City--”

“Gahh!” Fledge said, covering his face.

“Come here to enjoy the food and the scenery, huh?” Prince Ajax teased. His two armored gryphon guards behind him snickered. “Been keeping a weather eye on that one, am I right?”

Fledge made frantic shushing motions. “She'll hear you!” he stage whispered.

A moment later the gryphon girl made a reappearance, along with several of her coworkers; another gryphon, a couple of fillies, a zebra mare, even a petite and surprisingly cute and fluffy diamond dog female.(2) They crowded around the counter, babbling. “Really?” “No Way?” “Our li'l Fledge?” They crowded around the counter, job forgotten, fussing and flirting with the increasingly flustered gryphon pup. Ajax's eyebrow climbed further up his forehead as he gave Fledge a calculating eye.

“Or maybe you're keeping an eye out for more than one,” he said. “You're gonna cut a swathe of destruction when you get a little older--”

“Prince Ajaaaaax!” At this point Fledge was practically curled up into a solid ball of fur and feathers.

The cashier girl laughed and gave Fledge a smile. “Guess you're the hero of the hour, huh, cutie? Now that deserves a hero's reward--” To Fledge's everlasting astonishment she leaned forward and gave him a beak nuzzle. “Now we just gotta try and bend the rules for our favorite hero customer now don't I? Lemme go talk to the manager--” she hopped away from the counter and disappeared into the back of the restaurant. A moment later she returned with a slightly harried-looking stallion, who eyed the group at his counter and put on his most regretful expression.

“I'm sorry, your Highness,” he said with a weary sigh to Prince Ajax. “We would love to fill your order, especially with all you and the young fellow here have done, but the Mayor's “Good Health For Your Own Good” ordinances mean we would get hit with all sorts of fines if we served you any meal larger than a certain size, or sold you more than a certain number of orders at once---- filthy little control freak closed THAT loophole fast enough--” he muttered under his breath, seething briefly-- “and yes, I know it's ridiculous and it's none of the Mayor's business and everything else I'm sure you want to say, but--”

Ajax held up a talon. “Before you go on,” he said. “And coincidentally, nogryphon here blames you for this... I believe that this is what this is for.” He accepted a scroll from the guard on his right and
handed it to Fledge. “Young gryph? Would you do the honors.” He patted Fledge on the back. “Nice and loud now.”

Fledge smoothed down his feathers and composed himself. He unrolled the scroll, revealing the royal seal, and held it out at arm’s length.

“ Um.... Hear Ye, Hear Ye. Whereas they are a vi-o-la-tion of Free Market Principles, are a Tres--- um, Tes-- oh. Are a trespass against civil lib... civil liberties, and Whereas it is nopony's darn business what another pony drinks or eats, especially not the business of that poozer Mayor Fussbudget, or of any bunch of wet nancy whiny busybody city hall control freaks---”

Several of the patrons laughed and applauded at that one. Fledge cleared his throat again and continued.

“Therefore by royal decree the city ordinances collectively known as the “Good Health For Your Own Good Ordinances” are hereby PERMANENTLY REVOKED. On this day in the year of … uh etcetera etcetera..., by order of Her Highness Princess Rainbow Dash, Alicorn Of Loyalty, Champion of Equestria and Defender of the Realm.”

A cheer went up from the patrons. Fledge paused and blushed. “uh, should I read this part out loud?” he stage whispered to Ajax. Ajax nodded. Fledge cleared his throat.

“P.S....Now fix my order, darn it.”

The restaurant roared with laughter. More than anything else that week, that tidbit alone cemented Princess Dash as Windy City's favorite princess.

“I hope they're not having trouble getting the food,” Scootaloo said, just a little bit grumbly. “I am starving.”

“Nah, they're good,” Wheezer said. “Princess Rainbow Dash said she gave them something to grease the wheels, she said. I wonder what, though?”

“I'm wondering what's up with that,” Crackerjack murmured. He nodded his head toward the corner where Dash was standing, making astonished noises and faces into a makeup compact.

“That's... a little odd, yeah,” Mach agreed.

“Oh that's a magic compact,” Scootaloo said. “It's got a mini magic mirror inside. She can contact the other princesses that way.”

“Really? Cool. I wonder if they'll be on the market soon? I can think of a zillion times we couldda used something like that,” Crackerjack said thoughtfully.

Dash shut her compact and rejoined them. She looked stunned. “Scootaloo? …. I think you need to make a little call. No no no,” she said when Scootaloo started to open her own compact. “We'll need the big mirrors for this one. Guys? Clear a space around this side of the bed...” she motioned everypony away from the side of the bed with the wardrobe.
“What's wrong?” Scootaloo said, worried.

Dash started to grin knowingly. “Well, don't you wanna call the other Crusaders, let 'em know about... developments?” she said.

“Oh. OH! Yeah, oh boy! I can't wait to show the others this!” She looked eager. But almost instantly the excitement turned to apprehension.

“Somethin' wrong?”

“Yeah! I mean, No! But... I mean.... I'm so excited!-- but....” she bit her lip. Memories flashed across her eyes of a thousand Cutie Mark crusades, and through them all an unspoken promise to get their cutie marks-- together-- or die trying. There had always been that fear they'd all shared, and never spoken, about what would happen if one of them got their mark before the others. And now the realization that she had gone and leapt ahead of the others, further than any of them could have dreamed, was sinking in. Anxiety filled her belly. "Do you think they'll be... okay? I... I dunno-- I mean..." she gestured meaningfully at herself. "What if it's... too much...?"

Dash put a comforting hoof on her shoulder. “Scootaloo, they're your friends. They'll be happy for you.” She chuckled. "Besides, trust me-- you just might be in for a surprise.” She set Scootaloo up on the edge of the bed and opened up the wardrobe. The Nobody's Fools were surprised when the wardrobe revealed not clothes but mirrors. They crowded around behind Scootaloo and watched in curiosity as she opened up the magic mirror cabinet all the way. “Conference call. C'mon everypony!” Dash said. The mirrors glimmered as she stepped back out of the way, and the Fools all gasped as the mirrors began to glow.

“Crusaders?” Mach said to Dash out of the side of his mouth as she stepped around in front of the mirrors, hiding Scootaloo behind her.

“Scootaloo's best friends. The three of them call themselves the Cutie Mark Crusaders. Those three have been trying to get their cutie marks together for ages.” She chuckled. “Getting up to their necks in trouble while they were at it, too.”

Softy overheard that. “But what happens when they get their cutie mark? Or when one of them gets their cutie mark before the others?”

“I think that's what Rookie is worried about, Softy,” Mach said quietly.

“Ohhhh...”

Dash snickered. “Oh, I don't think that's going to be a problem,” she said, leaving Mach and Softy mystified. Their attention was drawn back to the mirrors as the rest of the ponies in the room cooed in amazement. The mirrors no longer showed a reflection of Scootaloo or the room full of ponies behind her, but rather several very famous ponies.

“It's the Princesses!” someone yelped. Indeed it was. Princess Rarity, Applejack, Pinkie, Fluttershy (who meeped and disappeared out of frame when she saw how many ponies were watching), Twilight Sparkle, and in the center mirror, no less than Princess Celestia, who smiled warmly at all of them. The setup of the mirrors wasn't identical for each; For some reason Celestia's mirror only showed her from the neck up, and Princess Twilight's reflection seemed to be an extremely wobbly closeup.

“Ohmigosh! It's... It's Princess Everypony! I mean, it's Every Pony, Princess-- I mean-- Augh!” Wheezer rasped, fumbling for his inhaler.
“Should we bow??” somepony said frantically. Several of the princesses tittered, and Celestia actually gave a hearty laugh.

“Perhaps we should dispense with the formalities this time,” Celestia's reflection suggested. “It's not exactly a formal occasion after all.” Several of the Fools looked seriously relieved. “But what brings you to call, Rainbow Dash?”

“Yes, what's up?” Twilight's reflection said. “I'm sort of undercover here, guys... it's okay for now but I can't exactly be waving around a magic mirror.” An undercover princess? several ponies wondered.

“Yes, darlings,” Princess Rarity said. “I know you said you had a surprise, Dash, but I did say things were in a bit of a kerfluffle here on my end...” The alicorn of Generosity patted her mane-do. She had obviously been trying to hide bags under her eyes with makeup.

“You ain't just whistlin' Dixie, sister,” Princess Applejack said. While Rarity looked tired, Applejack looked outright frazzled. Though as for that, Dash was looking a bit worn out around the edges herself, Mach thought. She gave a half-grin. “But I kin guess why Dash called this little shindig. You wanted to spring mah little surprise on everypony yourself, dintcha, Dash?”

Dash grinned. “Not reeeeeally,” she said.

Rarity gave a throaty chuckle and tossed her mane. Several of the colts in the room swooned. “Oh, well, I doubt it has anything on my little surprise.” She pouted at Dash. “Dashie, you just promised you would'nt spring the surprise before I had a chance to arrange our little debut...”

“Oh my.” Fluttershy said, peeking out from behind her mane. “Nothing is wrong, is it?” She blinked her dewy eyes in worry. The colts who'd gotten weak at the knees over Rarity were joined by several others.

“No, no,” Dash said. “Just.. just go get the other Crusaders, okay?”

With mystified looks, Rarity and Applejack walked out of frame. They returned a minute later nudging somepony small ahead of them. Dash waited until they were seated in front of their mirrors.

“Hey, girls,” she said to the other two Crusaders. “Guess who's got a surprise...” she stepped to one side, revealing a nervously fidgeting Scootaloo.

“Hi guys,” she said weakly. She brushed her mane back from her horn. “Um, sur.... prise....??” The little orange alicorn trailed off, jaw hanging slack. Staring back at her from the magic mirrors were two OTHER little alicorn fillies.

“Holy moley,” one of the Nobody's Fools said. “They're poppin' up like mushrooms...”

Scootaloo stared, mouth hanging open. Applebloom and Sweetiebelle stared back. Scootaloo stood up on the bed and fluttered her wings. Applebloom and Sweetiebelle stood up on theirs and fluttered their wings as well. Scootaloo tapped her horn; Applebloom and Sweetiebelle did the same. Scootaloo turned sideways, showing them the brand new mark on her flank, and looked up to see them doing the same...

“Cover your ears,” Harshwhinny muttered loudly. She ignored the puzzled looks this statement got and put her hooves over her ears. “Three... two....”

“EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!” The eardrum splitting screech sent everypony on either side of the
mirror reeling as the three Cutie Mark Alicorns began bouncing up and down and shrieking with glee.

“Gahhh! My ears!”

“Deafened for life, I know it--”

“Girls! Some warning next time!”

“Owww...”

“Best day EVER!” Sweetiebelle shouted.

“Hear hear!” Applebloom said.

“Not any more, I can't,” Foster grumbled, digging in his aching ear with a hooftip.

“OH WAIT WAIT WAIT!” Scootaloo shouted. She stopped pronking in place. “Look!” She started flapping. Slowly she lifted up off the bed and began hovering in place. She fluttered a slow circle around the ceiling for a bonus, then hovered some more in front of the mirror. Her grin could have re-lit the sun.

“You kin flah?” Applebloom said, so excited her accent nearly strangled her.

“She can fly!” Sweetiebelle shrieked.

“EEEEEEEEEEE!”

“Augh, and again with the shrieking and the eardrum bleeding!” Foster said, clutching his head. Mercifully for his and everypony else's ears, the screaming had given way to cheers, shouts of delight and laughter, and hysterical high-speed babbling from the three new princesses as they each tried to tell their story, first to each other and then to the other princesses gathered at the mirror. Then Applebloom ran off to drag her cousin Babs out of bed, and Sweetiebelle ran off to drag Mudpuppy out of bed, and the ruckus started all over again.

The elder princesses, it had to be said, were just as giddy. Even Princess Fluttershy managed to venture a “yay,” and Princess Pinkie was practically ricocheting around her side of the mirror at the thought of the party she was going to throw. She paused in her pronking about to count the cutie marks and alicorns out loud and paused. “Aww, Dashie, everypony else has two and you have just one,” she said. “Didn’t you ever find that mysterious stallion alicorn you told us about?”

“Ooh yes, darling, do give us an update,” Princess Rarity said. “A mysterious dashing stranger who woos you with roses-- quelle romantique.” She all but swooned at the thought.

Dash simply sat there turning red. Harshwhinny was standing just out of frame and smirking evilly. “Suffice it to say Her Highness' search didn't quite produce the results she expected---” she said loudly enough to be heard.

Mach growled and buried his head in his hoodie. If he'd known that giving a princess a lousy rose would give him this much trouble....

“Scuse me a minute--” Dash ducked around the cabinet and glared violently at Harshwhinny. “Don't you dare try and pull this on me,” she hissed. “You already let me make a fool of myself-- and by the way that was the meanest, nastiest, most underhanded--”
“It surprises me,” Harshwhinny said sotto voce. “That it hasn't occurred to you yet...”

“What?” Dash snapped.

“That Princess Luna hasn't been introduced to our newest alicorn Prince yet.”

Dash stopped. A smile slowly spread across her face; it was the most frightening smile Mach had seen since the day Bananas Foster had figured out how to set a raincloud on fire.(3) “Oh this is too good,” she said. She pointed at Mach. “You? Play along; stay out of sight till I signal you. Pinkiiiiieeee?” she said, stepping back around the cabinet. “Where's Princess Luna....?”

---

Five minutes later Dash was rolling on the floor, hooves pedaling in the air as she laughed her guts out, and a mortified Luna was gawking at an equally mortified Mach One.

“Oh man, oh MAN,” Dash howled. “Celestia are you sure we're immortal, 'cause I'm DYING here-...”

“Dash, now that was mean,” Applejack scolded, biting her lip as her sides shook.

Celestia, on the other hand, was fairly amused. “Dear Luna, it seems you've been HAD,” she tittered.

Meanwhile, the Nobody's Fools were rolling on the floor laughing at their peerless leader-- who was hunched down in his baggy hoodie and grumping at everything hard enough to curdle milk. It was the second time in two days that his masculine ego had taken a kick to the face, and he was starting to feel rather sorry for himself... till he looked up at the extremely disappointed Moon Princess in the mirror and saw her eyes were as wide as a hurt fawn's, and that her lower lip was just, ever so barely, starting to wibble.

Mach got a wicked notion to get back some of his own. He snorted at the prostrated Rainbow Dash. “Well fine then,” he said. “Maybe she'll give me a chance when you wouldn't.” There was a vase of flowers standing on a nearby vanity table; he plucked a rose from the display and sauntered to the mirror. “What do you say, Princess?”

The room fell dead silent. Luna gawked at him for a moment then found her voice. “Do not mock at me, youth,” she said, turning her muzzle up and looking away. “Thou'rt but a stripling still, and my heart is not a toy for thee to play!”

“Hey, I know I'm young,” he shrugged. “But maybe I like... older women. Ones with a little more maturity and sophistication--” he shot Dash a scathing look. “--or at least more than what I've seen--”

“Hey!”

“And it's not like I'm going to be this young forever,” He pointed out, lowering his lashes seductively. He leaned in; almost against her will Luna found her eyes drawn back to the mirror. He held the rose up and let it caress the glass.

"This bud of love, by summer's ripening breath,
May prove a beauteous flower when next we meet..."
Somepony female let out a squeak. Luna's eyes tracked the rose like she was mesmerized. Mach decided to go for broke.

“She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies...”

There was a long silence. “Whoa,” somepony said. “He is good.”

Luna shook her head and came to herself. “Thou impertinent whelp,” she gasped. “Thy cheek! Thy affrontery! To speak to a princess of the realm and the mistress of the night and moon with such---such sensual familiarity!!” she huffed in outrage and turned away from the mirror. “Thou hast my scorn!” She picked up a folding fan and fanned herself. “New princeling or no, if We speak to thee in a year, twill be too soon! In fact, We shan't speak or look to thee in-- in....”

“He's fifteen,” Pinkie Pie muttered to her.

“In SIX years! So there!”

“Legal is eighteen in Philadelphia,” Pinkie added helpfully.

“--Or mayhap three. Good morrow, sir!” And she flounced out of the frame.

Mach sauntered away from the mirror. “Oh well, maybe next time,” he said, casually dropping the rose back in the vase before plunking down where he'd been before. He had a smirk on his face. Dash on the other hand had an expression like she knew she’d just been “had,” and wasn't quite sure how it happened.

Luna wasn't the only one who was flustered. The princesses in the mirrors were looking rather flushed; one was fanning herself with her hat, while another was daintily splashing water on her face. “I get the feelin' that somepony got the last laugh, an' it ain't none of us,” Applejack said, amused.

“Give him a few years,” Celestia said in amusement, even though her own cheeks were fairly pink.

There was a knock at the door. It swung open, revealing Prince Ajax and Fledge, bearing a dozen paper bags. His guards were carrying even more. “Hail the conquering heroes!” he said, chuckling. “We return, bearing golden-fried bounty!”

“All right, food!” the momentary awkwardness popped like a balloon as everyone present cheered the arrival of sustenance.

“That sounds lak a good idea, actually,” Applebloom said. “Kin we order up somethin', Applejack?”

After the food had been dispersed and the worst hunger pangs had been quenched, they had all settled in while the three Cutie Mark Crusaders (and one Manehattan cousin) told their ascension
stories. Pretty soon the listeners on either side of the mirror were listening wide eyed and open-mouthed, food forgotten halfway to their mouths, as three little fillies described adventures that would leave Daring Do herself staggered.

“Zombies? Real live zombies??”

“You flew into a tornado?”

“Oh horseapples, there's more than one Discord? Augh!!”

“A necromancer... yikes.”

“Seriously. Just hair and sneakers...”

The storytelling eventually devolved into a heated debate amongst everyone present as to whose story was the coolest. Most of the pegasi and gryphons felt that Scootaloo and Mach’s story was the most awe-inspiring; it wasn’t wings-only bias, really, so much as being aware of just how epic tackling a runaway supercell actually was. The others didn't really understand; it's hard to appreciate the size of an elephant if one has never seen one.

On the other hoof, it was pretty unanimous that Sweetiebelle and Mudpuppy's story was the most frightening. Every pony, gryphon, and zonkey present shuddered in horror at the kappas, hinkypunks, and zombies, felt the sickening horror of the evil laboratory, and shivered in fear of the horrible lich. And more than a few cried at the freeing of the zombie spirits, and the tragic end of Cotton Mouth.

By contrast a fair few of them, Foster in particular, were of the conviction that Applebloom and Bab's story was the most hilarious. “You shot BEES up his NOSE?” Foster squawked. He was laughing so hard he was crying.

“Fizzin' whizbees, actually,” Applebloom said. “They're also called twittermites... sorta like bees that make lightning--”

“Bees and LIGHTNING up his nose! Even better!”

Some were more focused on the more technical aspects of the misadventures. “You tried to halt a class one supercell with direct magical kinetic manipulation??” Twilight all but shouted at Rainbow Dash. “Haven't your tutors told you anything about kinetic-thaumatic feedback? That would have been like plugging your horn into the turbines on the Hoofer Dam!(4) You should have been FRIED!”

“Well get plenty of rest, lots of fluids and avoid using magic for a few days,” Celestia said firmly. “You'll need time to recuperate from that, and the more you use your magic the longer it will take to heal up.”

Of course, with the Cutie Mark Crusaders present, the topic would drift, at least for them, to the obvious. “....And it's really really awesome and all,” Scootaloo said doubtfully, prodding at her flank. “The laurel's for victory. And I get what the wings are about, obviously-- but... a square and a circle?”

Wheezier peered through his spectacles at Scootaloo's flank, possibly a bit closer than was polite. “Oh, I recognize those,” he said. “Those are the geometric symmetry lines from the Vitruvian
Alicorn, by the Neightalian artist and polymath Bold Lion.”

“The guy who made Applebloom's statue?” Scootaloo said, confused. “And the who with the what?”

“The Vitruvian Alicorn,” Wheezer repeated impatiently. “You've seen it-- that drawing of an alicorn standing like--” he stood up on his hind hooves with his forelegs stretched out to the sides. Several ponies made “ohh” sounds. He dropped back down to all fours. “Ponies used to think it was a sketch of Celestia or Luna when they were recently ascended and still the same size as other ponies centuries ago, but in actuality it was supposed to be an overlapped drawing of earth pony, pegasus and unicorn, to show their similarities and differences.” He shrugged. “You'd think the fact the drawing had twelve legs would have clued them in.”

“Oh yeah. I remember--- Miss Cheerilee had a health class book with that on the cover,” Scootaloo said. “But what does it mean?”

“Well on one level it probably refers to your own triplicate nature as an alicorn,” Wheezer said, pushing his glasses up his nose. “But also, because you're an athlete and a dancer, it represents your mastery over your body.”

“Oh. Cool.”

“You're quite well read,” Twilight said, pleased.

Wheezer hiked up his baggy sweater, showing his cutie mark-- a brain floating over a book. “It's my special talent,” he said. “Eiditic memory. I read it once, I remember it forever.”

“Yeah, he's like a four legged reference library,” Spritz said, giving Wheezer an affectionate shoulder punch.

“And you will note that all three of you have laurel wreaths around your marks,” Twilight's reflection added. “Not only does a shared cutie mark feature indicate extreme closeness--- like family ties or lifelong friendship--- a golden laurel is a symbol of success or mastery... for example, like a 'poet laureate' is a master of poetry. In your case, Scootaloo, mastery of your body and all things athletic. Just as Applebloom's shows mastery of invention and intellect, and Sweetiebelle's shows a mastery of music on a deeply spiritual level.”

“Body, mind and spirit,” Celestia recited, pleased. “You three are linked in a truly profound way.”

“Yes, that's what I said...” Twilight said.

Dash snerked. “Only you, Egghead.”

“Cool!” Scootaloo said. “Cutie Mark Crusaders forever!” she put up her hoof to the mirror for a brohoof.

“But we're not crusading for our cutie marks anymore,” Sweetiebelle said.

“Yeah. Actually most of us kinda overshot the mark there,” Applebloom said, fluttering her wings a bit.

“So what are we now?” Sweetiebelle fretted.

“Aww, come on, we're still US,” Babs said. “We'll figure out a cool name for it later.” She snickered. “At least the Cutie Mark Crusaders finished in typical Cutie Mark Crusader style.” The
other three giggled and nodded.

“And what would that be?” Celestia asked.

“Action,” Scootaloo said.

“Adventure,” said Applebloom.

“Danger,” Sweetiebelle said.

“Disaster,” said Babs. “and....”

“MASSIVE PROPERTY DAMAGE!” All four chorused, to general laughter.

Other ponies were focusing on far more profound and pressing issues of deep philosophical and societal implications. “HE GAVE YOU A FAKE BIRTHDAY CAKE FOR YOUR BIRTHDAY?” Pinkie Pie shrieked.

“Yeah. But it was a long time ago...” Mach found himself backpedaling carefully. The bubbly Alicorn of Laughter's transformation at his story was alarming. Her reflection had become eerily underlit and her voice was echoing strangely.

“There is no statute of limitations on the Law of Party,” she intoned, glaring. “There WILL be a RECKONING.”

“Okay, fine, just let him live?” Mach squeaked. He found himself seriously starting to pity his selfish vote-grubbing uncle.

“Oh don't be silly,” Pinkie said, suddenly her bubbly self again. Then just as suddenly she was back to scary mode. “He'll live.”

_Yup. Definitely pitying him now_, Mach decided.

“....And you've been studying magic all on your own,” Princess Twilight said. “You're entirely self-educated?”

Presto nodded. “Seeing as I'm an earth pony,” he said. “No magic schools or tutors around here will take me.”

“Oh well that's just ridiculous,” Twilight scoffed. “Even if you can't cast the spells yourself, there are entire fields of study where an academic knowledge are more important. Theoretical magic research for example. Why I have an old classmate, Sunburst. He lives in the Crystal Empire where he does his research and study. Even though he has hardly any raw magical power, he's one of the most brilliant magical theoreticians in Equestria. Heck, he has to have his assistant do the practical testing of his spells for him... well, actually it's his fiancée, but she's also his assistant. Starlight Glimmer. He provides the brains, she provides the brawn, magically speaking.”

“How'd they come to an arrangement like that?” Presto said.

“There's kind of an awkward story behind that...” Twilight said, grimacing a bit. “It seems he rescued her from an anti-cutie mark cult way out in the back of nowhere.”
“Why is that an awkward story, Twilight dear? It sounds rather dashing and romantic,” Rarity said.

“Um, well, it seems she started the cult, originally,” Twilight explained, cringing a bit. “Then her lieutenant overthrew her and took over and ruled the place with an iron hoof, till Sunburst showed up.... It's kind of a touchy subject with her, it's best not to bring it up.” She shook her head. “Anyway, he would be fascinated with your amateur research into cross-tribal magic. I can put you in touch with him if you like...”

“You would do that?” Presto said eagerly.

“Of course!” Twilight said, beaming. “You're a brilliant young colt, Presto. I wouldn't be surprised if he took you on board as his apprentice or even as his assistant. It would be just criminal if a promising young colt of your caliber was held back because of some institutionalized prejudice...”

“So this is the first member of the Nopony...” Sweetiebelle said.

“Nobody's Fools.” Scootaloo corrected.

“Of them. Flute is the first one you met?” Sweetiebelle said.

“Yes.” Flute nodded along with Scootaloo. “He can't speak. But he can do this neat trick... show her, Flute.” Flute complied. Glowing motes of light floated off the tip of his horn, each one playing a different sound; twittering birds, bells, a slide whistle, a creaking door, and a handful of glowing motes that played a musical scale.

“Oh, that was lovely!” Fluttershy said, applauding. “But... if he can do that, can't he make words that way?”

“Um, yeah, kinda. But only short ones,” Scootaloo explained. Flute demonstrated. The next few glowing bubbles went “Hey!” “Yeah!” “Ha!” “No!” Some were muddled and hard to distinguish. Others were a lifeless monotone. Flute made a face and shrugged.

Sweetiebelle got a speculative look on her face. “Can he.... make one sing a note, and hold it? Like this. Aaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhh....” she sang.

Flute nodded. He closed his eyes and focused. A much more concentrated dollop of light rose from the tip of his horn. “Aaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhh....” it sang in a lovely coltish soprano. He opened his eyes, pleased with himself.

“Okay, now hold it!” Sweetiebelle said quickly. Flute kept the mote going. “Now make it go uuuuuup,” she sang in ascending scale. Flute mimicked her. “And doowwwwwwwnn...” Flute imitated her again. “And now: Do Re Mi Fa So La Ti Do.... Do Mi Re Fa Mi So Fa La So Ti La Do Ti Re Do....” Flute followed along, note for note. “Oh good!” Sweetiebelle said, clapping her hooves. “Can you turn it on and off without it going away?” He complied “Oh. Perfect!” she said in delight.

“Now swallow it!”

Flute let out a mote that could best be described as “?”
“Let it float into your mouth and down your throat,” Sweetiebelle explained. She tapped herself on the throat. “And let it stop right about here. It's just magic, it won't block your air or anything.” Flute looked at her suspiciously. “Go on,” she urged. Finally he shrugged, opened his mouth and let the glowing dot float in.

“Aaaaaaaamm....” He closed his mouth. They could see the light glowing through his skin, stopping halfway down his throat. “Mmmmmm...”

“Okay, now--”


Scootaloo shrieked. “Omigosh, Sweetiebelle you're a GENIUS! GUYS! Guys, listen to Flute!!”

“We can hear!” Mach said, amazed. “Flute, dude!”

“Way to go, guy!”

“I cann talk, I can talk, I can talk...” Flute sang. His eyes were tearing up and his smile threatened to split his face. Everyone within reach mauled and backslapped him.

“And sing too, apparently,” Foster said.


“Y'know, that could work for other ponies too,” Applebloom said suddenly.

“But not everypony can do magic like that,” Scootaloo objected.

“Well no,” Applebloom admitted. “But if you made a li'l speaker, lahk MC-Pon3 uses... only real small... an' held it up to yer throat... hmm... maybe on a li'l strap around th' neck?” Eyes going unfocused, she grabbed a notepad and a pencil off a nightstand and started scribbling.

“Oh isn't this wonderful?” Fluttershy said happily. “It's just so... oh... just so YAY.” She clapped her hooves in glee.

“Indeed, darlings,” Rarity said, pleased. She petted Sweetiebelle's back as her little sister continued to try and disappear under her own forehooves. “Miracles great and small seem to be popping up all over today...”

“Wait'll your Mom and Dad see this, Flute,” Fledge said. “Or, well, hear it.”

“Where are all your parents, any way?” Prince Ajax interjected. He was standing back and just enjoying the spectacle. He'd known Equestria was an unusual place, but now he was thinking that extraordinary was a far better word for it.

“The parents of this lot are down in the guest cabins, still asleep last I checked,” Harshwinny said. “With luck they'll be awake soon...”

Crackerjack snorted. “This early in the morning? On a weekend? You couldn't get my old man out of bed without dynamite,” he said.
“Yeah,” Spritz said. “After a night like last night, we'll be lucky to see them before the crack of noon.” The others guffawed in agreement.

“It does seem we all have long days ahead of us,” Celestia said. “I had best be going. Best of luck, my little ponies.” Her mirror winked out.

“Gracious yes,” Rarity said. “There's still work to do, now that wretch Malifec is gone. They're debating about what to do with the ruins of Port Malfou... it seems Sweetiebelle's little warrior-garden has been growing like crazy. We may have to negotiate a peace treaty with the sunflowers... ta, everypony.”

“Bye!” Sweetiebelle chirped. She waved just as their mirror blinked out.

“Ugh, and they want me to oversee the cleanup of the Glass Palace,” Applejack said. “Maker knows what they expect me to do other'n stand there saying 'be sure an' sweep all the bits up.' ”She rolled her eyes. “later, y'all.” And she too vanished from her mirror.

“Oh dear, and I have to get back to the Jamboree,” Fluttershy said. “And there's still a bit of cleanup left to do after the squirrel incident... Goodbye everypony.” Her reflection winked out.

“...Squirrel... Incident?” Mach said.

“Don't ask, and you won't regret knowing,” Dash assured him.

“And I have been on this compact WAY too long,” Twilight said. “Spike and Flash are probably going spare wondering what the holdup is. Oh, I have your mailing address, Presto, so Sunburst should be contacting you soon....” everypony heard knocking. “Oops, time's up, gottagobye!” Her mirror went dark, then showed only a reflection of the room.

“And what about you, Pinkie Pie? Gonna be helping Rarity? You're both in Neigh Orleans right now, right?”

“Oh abso-rootely tootely, Dashie!” Pinkie said. “But I also gotta plan out the big 'Cutie Mark Crusaders Reuniascensiociuteconara!' “

“A wha?”

“It's a big party for when we all get back together,” Pinkie said. “A cuteceneara for everypony who got a cutie mark, an ascensioneara for everypony who became an alicorn, and a big reunion party for all of us! Ooo, and a 'first flight' party for Scootaloo-- though wouldn't that be for everypony since everypony who got wings had a first flight too?” she pondered briefly. “Oh who cares, more party!”

“Uh, Pinkie, I think we're all going to be having smaller parties separately for....” she stopped herself in the face of Pinkie's cheerful lack of comprehension. It was really unlikely that Rainbow Dash would ever be able to impress on the Party Pony the idea of having less party for any reason. “You know what, Pinkie? You go do your thing. The rest of us will just... um, yeah.”

“Roger Wilco, Dashie! Catch ya later!” And Pinkie vanished with a pop.

“And our long day is just beginning too,” Dash said to Scootaloo and Mach One. “The rest of you? Feel free to stay here, hang out on the ship with your parents. The three of us, we got the Lee Valley cleanup to oversee, and some royal foofaraw around town to take care of. Yeah, you too, hotshot,” she said to Mach. “Welcome to the joys of royal princehood.

“But first, we got a stop down at the Courthouse....”
In many societies it has become standard practice to bring notorious criminals to court as quickly and covertly as possible, bringing them from the prison cell to the courthouse by swift vehicles and then hustling them past a gauntlet of press photographers to the front door-- exposing them to public scrutiny for as briefly as possible. This approach has yet to entirely catch on in Equestria.

Princess Celestia and Luna had been long of the mind that those who brought violence, misery and destruction on their communities should be exposed to the eyes of the community, and most municipalities were in agreement with that. In the case of Windy City, it was traditional that those who had committed high and terrible crimes were marched, in manacles and on hoof, from their holding cell in the jail at the foot of Kessel Road, all the way up that winding path to City Peak where the courthouse awaited them.

The two terrorists who had been caught in the Thunderdome were given the full treatment. They were clapped in manacles, and with scowling Watchponies before and behind them, were trudged past crowds of onlookers on the long slow path up Kessel Run Road. They tramped on, heads low, enduring the flash of cameras and shouted epithets as angry citizens jeered or cursed them. The first few blocks, they shouted crownbreaker slogans back, intermingled with their own curses and insults. By the halfway point they were both too tired to spare the breath.

When they arrived at the steps to the Courthouse, their weariness was quickly washed out with adrenaline-pumping dread. Standing at the top of the Courthouse steps waiting for them was Princess Rainbow Dash. She was in her full royal gear, coronet, peytral, and shoes. She was flanked on either side by six uniformed Wonderbolts, who were in turn flanked by armed Royal Guardponies whose armor gleamed in the sun. Everything about her appearance and stance told them that this trial was going to be very public, very official, very by-the-book and so very not in their favor. Standing next to her group was Prince Ajax, who was himself flanked by four armed and armored gryphons, all of whom were very unsubtly doing their best to look like angry alpha predators.

Dash was not a subtle pony. She was outwardly angry, which meant she was inwardly seething. She descended the steps and faced the two manacled ponies. For the second time she felt the aura emanating from them—She had felt it when they had been skulking past her, disguised as maintenance workers. If she had only known before what it was. She might have caught them before it was too late to stop them. It was an aura that left her feeling chilled, and faintly nauseous, an invisible cloud that started out faint grew stronger and more unpleasant as she grew closer. It was the aura of betrayal.

Her nostrils flared at the reek of it. The two illusionary scents clashed, like rotten flowers clashing with burnt meat--- she knew there was no loyalty between them, that given a moment's chance each would squeal on the other to save their own skins. All the better for the investigators, Dash thought. They'd both squeal like pigs caught in a fence.

She pulled out the parchment Harshwhinny had given her and began reading. “Poindexter Heraldry,” she said to the cowering orange stallion. “Magic Fruit.” The green, dreadlocked mare cringed under her glare. “You were caught, red-hoofed, committing an act of sabotage and wanton destruction. You destroyed millions of bits’ worth of property, and endangered tens of thousands of lives, in an attempt to harm one of the Crown Princesses. You have been charged with destruction of public property, destruction of private property, attempted mass murder, treason, and attempted
regicide.” She stepped back and let Prince Ajax step forward. He pulled out his own scroll.

“Poindexter Heraldry. Magic Fruit. By treaty of extradition between the throne of Equestria and the crown of the Griffon Empire, once a verdict has been reached by the courts of your kingdom, you will be extradited to Griffonstan in the Griffon Empire, where you will stand trial before the King for the attempted murder of the representatives, emissaries and soldiers of the Empire, and for the crime of attempted regicide against the Crown Prince. Any verdict against you there will stand alone, and you will serve any sentence consecutively with the one you are given in your homeland.” He rolled up the scroll and stepped back. Dash gave both of them a glare.

“In other words,” she said. “You two morons are going to be interrogated, put on trial, and then you're going to be dumped in the deepest, darkest hole that either the Equestrian or Griffon courts can find. We might cut you some slack if you cough up whoever put you up to this-- so I'd be really ready to squeal, if I were you two.” She looked from one to the other. “Do either of you two idiots have anything to say to the public before we haul you inside?”

Poindexter was on the point of blubbering. But he spun around and shouted to the crowds. “You don't understand!” he screamed, his voice cracking. “We had to do it! We had to do something to stop them!”

One of the reporters crowding the steps behind the line of Watchponies spoke up. “Stop who from doing what?”

“The princesses, you idiots!” Magic fruit shrieked at him. “Haven't you seen how their numbers are growing? How their power is growing? Don't you know what they have planned for us? Don't you see what they are going to do to us? They're going to change Equestria beyond recognition. They're going destroy our way of life if we don't stop them!”

Dash felt her temper blaze up. She flared her wings and magically amplified her voice. “YES. WE'RE CHANGING EVERYTHING!” she said. Everypony, even the two convicts, fell into silence as her voice bounced off the stone walls of the buildings around them. “We're trying to change things and make them BETTER. Some of the changes will be good, and some of them will be bad. And we'll probably make a few mistakes. But we'll try to fix them-- we'll try to get rid of the bad, and to save the good.”

“But change happens. There's always gonna be new things, and the way our lives are lived will be different tomorrow from the way they were yesterday. That's the way it's always been!” She scowled. “And if saving your 'way of life' takes killing a stadium full of innocent ponies, then it isn't worth saving anyway.”

“Take them away.” The two saboteurs were frog-marched into the courthouse to the cheers and applause of the people of windy city.

It was unusually quiet in the Mayor's office. Fussbudget sat behind his desk, lamps unlit, desk uncluttered, a decanter full of cider at his elbow and a glass full in his hoof, staring at nothing. After the debacle of the Thunderdrome Collapse, and the subsequent revelation of who had been responsible, he had gone to his office, locked himself in, and contemplated his life.
It wouldn't be fair to say his life had completely unraveled in just a few days, he thought. After hours of sitting alone, sipping hardened cider, he'd come to acknowledge that the thread in that particular sweater had worked its way loose a long time ago. It was just that this week the last few bits had given way and now he was fully aware that he was sitting in a metaphorical pile of unraveled yarn....

“Hey, Uncle. How's it hangin’?”

Fussbudget looked up. Standing in front of his desk, smirking at him, was his insufferable nephew. Who, of course, was now sporting a unicorn's horn as well as feathers. “So you're an alicorn now.” he sighed. “That last little bit seems just about right.” He ought to feel more surprised, he thought. Infuriated. Outraged. Flabbergasted, even. But somehow he wasn't even surprised. He supposed he was all out of emotion at this point. He glanced over at the door; he was sure he'd locked it... “You had a key,” he said. “Of course.”

Mach One levitated the decanter and a clean glass over to himself. “Nope. But a sliding bolt's easy with telekinesis,” he said. He poured himself a glass of cider and knocked it back.

“So what brings you by my office, Your Highness?” Fussbudget said sarcastically. “Come to watch my final ruin? Maybe hoping to see me end it all-- figure I'd do a dead-canary dive headfirst off the mountainside?”

“No,” said Mach. “You pretty much did that the day you got into politics.”

“Har de har.”

“--No, I got other issues.” Mach's face hardened. “I wanna know your connection to the Crownbreakers.”

To Mach's surprise, Fussbudget looked amused. “Is that it?” he said contemptuously. “You figure that you'd solve the mysterious conspiracy, trace it back to me-- wrap me up, stick a ribbon on my nose and turn me over the the Princesses? 'It was the Mayor all along,' wouldn't that make it all nice and tidy?” He emptied his glass. “Sorry to disappoint you, Nephew. I have nothing to do with the Crownbreakers, whoever they are.”

“Don't give me that load of crap, Unc,” Mach sneered. The decanter cracked in his magical grip. “This has your stink all over it. You were all over the place providing cover for them. You tried to pin that terror manifesto from the Crownbreakers on me and my gang. One of the terrorists I caught planting bombs in the Thunderdome was your personal assistant.” The decanter shattered, jagged shards and droplets of overpriced cider scattering all over the carpet. “Tell me, Unc-- how big a donation did they make to your “election campaign,” huh? How much did they pay you to frame us? How much did they pay you to help them try to murder me and my friends last night??”

“I had nothing to do with them!!”

“Poindexter Heraldry worked right in your office!”

“He was an INTERN!” Fussbudget shouted. He panted, catching his breath. “He was an intern from the Academy. Just another temporary face around the office, I barely could remember his name half the time...” he realized he was standing and he sat back down. He pulled another decanter out of his liquor cabinet, this one of something a bit stronger, poured a glass and downed it. “All I knew about him is that he fetched my coffee and sorted my papers. I knew he was in a couple of those student protest groups but so are eighty percent of the trust-fund idiots attending there. Just like you and everypony else, I thought the Crownbreakers were just another bunch of rhetoric-spewing student blowhards. Hell, I saw that stupid logo on that letter and thought for sure they were just more pains
He shook his head. “You know how much time I spent trying to figure out how you hoodlums got that manifesto into the locked drawer on my desk? All along it was Poindexter... I’d given him a key...”

He looked up at Mach. He looked old and worn. “I know you can’t stand me, boy,” he said. “But do you really think I would work with a bunch of terrorists?”

Mach One stared at him for a minute. “Why not?” he said finally. “Unc, I watched you. For years. You’re a control freak. You want to control what everypony eats, what they drink, how they dress, what they read and write and say... and you made deals with every Devil in Windy City to be Mayor so you could do it. So what would it matter to you to deal with one Devil more?”

Fussbudget got to his feet, angry. “I did what I did for the good of Windy City---”

Mach sneered. “Oh bull. You did it for YOUR own good. You did it for the power. You spent every election cycle playing the Buttclown, schmoozing to every moonbat in Windy City, just so you could have another two years of being a tin-pot tyrant.

“And worst of all, you were an idiot at it. You were petty. You choked people to death with your petty laws, gave free rein to lunatics, and had the City Watch crusading against jumbo sodas and kids on skateboards while terrorists were practically holding meetings in your office.

“And now here you are.” Mach pointed his chin around the room. “It’s over, Uncle Fussbudget. You finally screwed up too big for you to hide it. By tomorrow every pony in Windy City...every pony in Equestria... is going to know you had the leader of a radical terrorist group working right in your office, right under your nose. And that YOU were in charge when they destroyed the Thunderdome and nearly killed tens of thousands of innocents.

“And you know what? I’m an alicorn prince now. I’m going to be around, doing everything I can to make sure nopony ever forgets it.”

“Enjoy your last days in office.” Fussbudget didn’t look up. He heard the door open, and then slam, and the sound of his nephew’s hooves on the tile floor as he walked way.
called you all here together because there are going to be some changes, and I wanted everypony on staff in this university to hear it straight from the horse's mouth. So thank you for coming. And if anypony's not here-- tough nuts to them, they can find out later." A few scowls in the peanut gallery deepened. She failed to quit smirking.

“Now you all know who I am, and I know you know, and I know you know that I'm not the Egghead princess. In fact I've never even been to college. So you're all thinking I might as well be talking out of my butt when I start talking about problems your college has. And that how you run this place is none of my business. ” Her smile dropped. “Well, guess what. I'm a Princess of Equestria, and your college gets funding from the throne. Which makes it my business. And I don't need to be an engineer to know a TRAIN WRECK when I see it.

“I don't even have to look hard to find places you're screwed up. I just have to read your brochure, or take a tour of your campus.

“You're supposed to be a school, and you've got classes here sucking up money that nopony with the brains of a turnip would pay for out of their own pocket.

“You're supposed to be this place where ponies think and debate and argue about stuff, and you've got campus speech codes where you punish students for saying this, that or the other-- and they change every week.

“You're supposed to be preparing your students to go out and be part of the world and you've got 'safe spaces' where they can go run and hide whenever somepony hurts their feelings and draw in coloring books till the sad feeings go away.” her scorn at this could have blistered paint.

“Our professors are supposed to be TEACHING. Your math professors are supposed to teach math, your science teachers are supposed to teach science. Instead you've got tutti-frutti fruitcakes with axes to grind teaching classes, who give their students grades based on how well they agree with whatever fruitcake issues the professor has! You've even got students going on moonbat protest marches for extra class credit!

“And you're supposed to be spending all the bits we send you on making this school a better place and giving these kids a quality education. Instead you squeeze us, you squeeze the students-- I've seen the campus bookstore, shut up, you thieves-- then you take that money and flush it right down the crapper.

“You've made this school a joke. Everypony in Windy City knows that Alicorn Academy is nothing but an idiot factory. A, a breeding ground for morons, moonbats and radicals.... the kind of radicals, like the ones FROM YOUR SCHOOL, who blew up the Thunderdome last night and nearly dropped a super-tornado right on your city.” That got some murmured shock out of the audience.

“Guess what.” She gave them a smile that was rarely seen by anyone other than a marine biologist, and only then with a fin atop it. “We-- meaning Princess Celestia, Luna, and the rest of us--- have decided that there are going to be some changes.”

“Well, really, one change. It has to do with the money you get from us.” The crowd stirred at this. “Oh, we're not cutting you off-- baby and bathwater, and all that. And we're not gonna come in and have a Princess sitting on your staff, dictating how the money is spent or some junk like that. Actually, this is gonna be real simple. From now on, instead of getting grants or loans or subsidies or... well, whatever else they call it when a college gets money from the government.... we're doing matching donations.” she paused to let them mutter the obvious question.

“That means that from now on, the Crown will match, bit for bit, the donations you receive from
private donors. Alumni, private companies, fundraisers, whatever. You raise ten million bits, you get
ten million more bits from the crown. You don't raise diddly, you don't get diddly.

“And it's line item. That means if you get a donation for your science department, the crown will
give you a matching donation for the science department. If you get a donation for scholarships, you
get a matching donation for scholarships. Hey, you even get a private donation for mare's studies or
underwater basket weaving, we'll match it. But it better be spent on that, and nothing else. You don't
get to take money meant for the arts classes and spend it on your hoofball field. And we WILL be
checking the receipts.”

Dash's evil smirk never wavered. “Now lemme give you some info. Maybe your accountants have
noticed, but donations from your alumni have been in the tank for years. We talked to a bunch of
them. It seems that a lot of them really don't approve of the tutti-frutti policies you guys have been
passing lately, and they've stopped donating. Of course you've been relying on funds from the
Crown to make up the difference.... but that just changed, dinnit?

“If I were you, I'd start listening when they start complaining about how you're screwing up their old
alma mater. If I were you, I'd start changing a few things. Or maybe you better get used to doing
without your whiskey, fancy cigars and cushy offices, your padded-out retirement funds or any of
the other little goodies you've been enjoying.

“LLLLLater.” That said, she dropped the microphone, walked off the stage and out the door.

---

• *You silly pretentious humans. Do you really think yours is the only Chef Boy-ar-dee in the
universe? (Bonus: IRL, Boy-ar-dee was a blue ribbon italian chef, whose marinara was so
popular people would pay extra for a little jar to take home... and thus an empire was born.
He was quality control till the day he died, too, so the current lamentable state of canned
ravioli is not his fault, and probably makes him weep in heaven.)*

1. Yes, SOY. Not to say there wouldn't be a huge market for burgers made of hay in Equestria--
were it actually possible to make a sandwich patty out of straw. But not every customer in
Windy City was a herbivore, after all, and making food that only some of your customers
could actually eat was poor business. Fortunately both gryphons and ponies could eat
soybean products, and thus a new era of interspecies understanding dawned thanks to the
proliferation of tasty meat-like, vegetarian food products. Certain shameless franchises of
course weren't above appealing to species snobbery by going the other direction and selling
"hayburgers" that were almost entirely soy and laced with shredded wheat hay substitute...
much as a certain human-world franchise which shall go unnamed is perfectly willing to make
a meat product patty out of pig tripe, heart, and scalded stomach, press it into a deceptively
shaped patty and sell it as a "McRib.

2. Why so many young and attractive females? Well, seeing as the store was right in the shadow
of an enormous academy with a large population of student bachelors, and seeing as the
owner of said restaurant was not born yesterday...
3. It involved rubbing alcohol and a complete disregard for personal safety.

4. The Hoofer Dam in Equestria is built for one and only one purpose— to provide electricity for Las Neighgas. It's something of a novelty city, really; Las Neighgas is the only Equestrian city to run entirely on the experimental technology 'electricity.' The regular accident reports due to tourists grievously misunderstanding how electricity works... or doesn't... are considered to be both utterly predictable and morbidly hilarious.
It was a beautiful day in Ponyville, the sort for which the tiny farming town had become famous for... it was in fact the town's third best well known feature(1), thanks to their exemplary weather patrol. The sun was coming up, the birds were singing, the fields shone with the morning dew and the paper-colt were out delivering the morning edition.

That last item would be later regarded as a terribly bad decision and would generate a great deal of controversy later. It would be inappropriate to say it was all downhill after that... but it certainly all went sideways.

---

Mayor Mare was sitting at her desk, going over the paperwork for the day when her assistant trotted in. “Your coffee and donut, Mayor, and the morning papers,” she said, laying everything on the Mayor's desk.

“Ah, thank you,” Mayor Mare said. Despite only being the Mayor of a small farming town, she had long ago made a habit of browsing the newspapers from all across Equestria. Ponyville, after all, had a well-deserved reputation as a crossroads for all of Equestria... well, perhaps “whistle stop” would be a more accurate term. Either way it was generally wise to keep abreast of events around the nation, as they tended to wander their way through Ponyville at some point or other. Humming cheerfully to herself, she took a sip of her coffee and spread the papers out so as to see the front pages all at once.

Out in the lobby, the Mayor's assistant heard the smash of a coffee mug on the floor followed by the unmistakable wet-raspberry sound of a spit take. This was followed by the Mayor faintly crying “No...!” and the thud of somepony hitting the floor...

“Mayor?” Miss Raven came galloping back into the office. She found the Mayor lying insensate on the floor, surrounded by scattered newspaper pages. The front page of the Canterlot Herald was facing up; there on the front page, above the fold, was a boldface caption and a collage of twelve... no, fourteen portraits. THE NEW FACES OF ROYALTY: WHAT DOES IT MEAN? The headline blared. Directly below it, front and center, were three photographs of three fillies that those in City Hall knew all too well. They were sporting effervescent smiles... and tiaras... and wings... and horns.

A moment later Miss Raven joined Mayor Mare on the floor, out cold.

---

The news spread across the town as the morning papers made their way through the winding streets. The agitation of the good citizens of Ponyville spread only a little bit slower. Coffee, milk, tea, and orange juice was spit-taked across breakfast tables; spoonfuls of cereal and forkfuls of pancake dropped to the floor, halted halfway from the bowl and plate to gaping mouths. Some in a panic raced off to work early; others in an equal yet opposite panic made the impulse decision to take one of their long-overdue sick days whether they were sick or not. Ponies yammered in alarm over their breakfast tables, or chattered over their backyard fences, or simply stood wherever they were with their newspaper of choice, making alarmed proclamations to nopony in particular. Ponyville was well on its way to another morning of well-seasoned and vine ripened pandemonium.

And the paper-colt rode on, blissfully unaware, his tricycle squeaking under his enthusiastic pedaling
and his propeller beanie spinning in the wind.

---

At Sugarcube Corner, Mister and Missus Cake were far too busy preparing the day’s orders of cakes, pies and pastries to stop and panic over the sudden ascension of the notorious trio of fillies. That was quite all right; Miss Cheerilee was there to do it for them. She was seated at one of the tables, destroying the utter hell out of her diet with an entire dozen strawberry creme-filled donuts as she tried to gorge her stress away. “I can't do it, I can't possibly be a teacher to three alicorn princesses,” she said as she snarfed down another glazed masterpiece. “I could barely manage them when they were ordinary mortal fillies. I'm only an earth pony mare, I'm not equipped to deal with three nascent nigh-cosmic entities. I'm not trained for it. I don't have the teaching degree for it!”

“There there now, dear,” Mrs. Cake said as she freshened up Cheerilee's coffee. “Now they aren't really all that bad of a threesome, are they?”

“No, no, they're not,” Cheerilee half sighed, half groaned. “They really are sweet girls. But the sheer havoc they unleash--” she looked up at Mrs. Cake. “Remember the talent show? The harvest parade? The go cart races?”

“I don't think the school budget can handle what three rambunctious little alicorns can cause...”

---

Halfway across town a bright pink filly in a tiara sat in an intersection, eyes riveted on the newspaper lying on the ground between her hooves. Ponies all up and down the street were frozen in mid stride, staring in morbid fascination at the pink filly and her silver-grey friend. Hardly surprising considering the unholy scream that had rent the air just a moment before. Now they lingered on, pinned by morbid fascination as unexpected drama unfolded right in the middle of the street in front of them.

Silver Spoon was growing concerned; Diamond Tiara had begun by shrieking, but her voice had rapidly spiraled upward into inaudible ranges known only to dogs. Silver Spoon wasn't exactly feeling copacetic herself after seeing the front page, but for the moment she was concentrating on trying to calm her best friend down before she did something crazy and foundered herself.

“Now, now, now,” she said, waving her hooves in soothing gestures. “Take it easy, Diamond--”

Diamond Tiara got to her hooves. “THAT'S IT, I'M DONE!” She staggered off blindly like a wind-up toy, only to come to a halt when her forehead met with a lamp post with a clang. She stood there, head pressed against the pole, not moving.

---

The stallions of Ponyville gathered around the Flim Flam brothers’ wagon at its common parking spot just at the edge of town. At this point nopony could really say why the two shysters were allowed back in Ponyville at all, save perhaps for an odd proprietary sense of ownership about the two. Or perhaps social convenience; after all, when a village had its own crook, con artist, idiot, or drunk, you didn't have to sit around wondering who to blame for the latest shenanigans.

At the moment they were fulfilling their roles as village shysters with flair. They were holding up the front page of the Canterlot daily and gesticulating wildly at a huge chalkboard behind them. “Place your bets gentlecots, place your bets,” Flim said. “You’ve heard the news, read the papers, now place your bets. The point spread is right up there on the board...”
“Twenty bits on Canterlot Castle,” some stallion shouted.

“Burn it down, knock it down, make it fall off the mountain or other?” Flam enquired, filling out a betting slip.
The stallion regarded the pictures of the three ascended fillies, blown up and mounted on the board, and brooded. “better put five bits on each,” he decided. “No telling which way they'll bounce.”

“A fair and conservative bet, my fine sir,” Flam said. “We'll give you three to two odds on that, seeing as they're currently each a thousand miles away from the capital... but seeing as they're royalty now they're bound to swing by there eventually.”

“Same as him, here,” said another stallion. “Only make it all of the above.”

Even Flim and Flam were taken aback. The two brothers stepped aside and put their heads together. “Really? Ten to one, then, we really don't want to be unfair, and that seems rather unlikely--” Flam said.

“Remember, brother,” Flim replied, “It also seemed unlikely that anypony could cause a tidal wave inside the local beauty salon.” (2) The two brothers met eye to eye, then turned to the stallion.

“Five to one,” they said in unison.

“Ten bits on zombie attack,” some stallion shouted.

“I'm sorry, we can't take that bet,” Flam said smoothly.

“Why not?”

“They already did that one.”

---

“What IS THIS?” the pink prima donna shrieked.

“Now Diamond--”

“What IS MY LIFE?” Diamond shouted to the uncaring sky.

“It's not that bad....”

"YES IT IS!!"

---

There was nothing to be seen or heard of the Flower Sisters all that day. Their shop was closed and the lights in their quarters above were dark, but frantic sawing and hammering could be heard. By the end of the day their greenhouse and shop were boarded up, the windows of their upstairs rooms were bricked closed, and a steady stream of mail order supplies had arrived at their residence and vanished down their cellar doors-- emergency rations, bottled water, entire bales of hay, fire extinguishers, tents, sleeping bags, first aid kits, hazmat suits, distress flares, shark, crocodile and barricuda repellant, and at least one life raft....

---

Diamond Tiara galloped back over and pointed dramatically at the newspaper with a quivering hoof.
The nightmare, their worst nightmare, stared up from the front page. “THIS IS HORSEAPPLES, SILVER!”

“I know—”

“IT'S FREAKING HORSEAPPLES!” She returned to her lamp post.”I can't DO this, Silver!”

“I can't either!”

“I CAN'T FREAKING DO THIS!”

Silver drew herself up and went over to where her friend stood. She pulled DT away from the light pole by the shoulders and shook her. “Snap out of it! We're in this together!”

Diamond looked at her with shell shocked eyes. “I appreciate it-- but-- look what we're DEALING with!” She pointed at the paper still lying in the street.”You gotta draw a line somewhere--”

“Diamond!”

---

Two of the village septuagenarians sat out on the balcony of the Ponyville Old Ponies' Home, rocking quietly and calmly watching the villagers below rushing hither and thither, yammering, binge-shopping for emergency supplies, having nervous breakdowns in the street or simply running in circles yelling in panic. The elderly earth stallion flipped idly through his copy of the local paper while his porchmate idly clicked her knitting needles back and forth in her magic. “Seems the CMC have ascended,” he said blithely.

“The who?” the mare said, not looking up from her needles.

"You know, the Cutie Mark Crusaders," the white maned stallion said, raising his voice a bit. Drat those hearing aids. "Three little fillies? Always askin' about how to get their Cutie Marks?"

"Oh, them," the mare said. "How nice for them." The trio were regular visitors at the senior citizen's home. It delighted the old folks to no end having young visitors, even if they did have rather one-track minds about cutie marks of late. Couldn't happen to a nicer bunch of fillies, as far as she was concerned. "Is THAT what all the fuss is about down there?" She peered nearsightedly over the rail at the hubbub in the street below."Ayep." The old stallion cocked an eyebrow and shook out his newspaper. They sat in companionable silence for another couple of minutes.

The stallion finally spoke again. "Can't help wondering," he said idly, "You think it'll ever dawn on all those ninnies down there that those three had next to nothing to do with all the disasters everypony blames 'em for?"

The old mare's needle-clicking paused as she thought it over. "Probably not,"she said. She sighed, disappointed in general with the youth of the day.

---

High up on Canterlot mountain, a draconequus paused in his perambulations through the halls of the royal palace. He pulled out a party horn, blew on it, and threw a handful of confetti in the air before proceeding on his way.

---
“You gotta draw a bucking line in the sand, Silver!” Diamond ranted. “You gotta look inside of yourself and say ’what am I willing to put up with today?’ “ She scooped up the paper with her hoof and shook it. “WELL NOT THIS! NOT-- FREAKING THIS!!!”

“WELL YOU CAN GIVE UP NOW OR YOU CAN SUCK IT UP!” Silver Spoon shouted, shaking her again. She glared at her best friend eye-to-eye. “’Cause I can’t do this without you, and you sure as heck can’t do it without me! SO LET’S PULL IT TOGETHER AND DEAL WITH IT!” She spun around and glared at one of the shopkeepers on the street. “AND WILL YOU SHUT OFF THAT STUPID HANS ZIMMER MUSIC???”

The store owner jumped, grinned sheepishly and turned off the victrola in his store display. The swelling dramatic music that had been slowly filling the street vanished with a click. “Better,” Silver said grumpily.

"We’re doomed," Diamond Tiara whimpered. "We were the in crowd, they were the out crowd. When they get back we’re going to be so far out of the in crowd they’ll have to make up whole new words to describe how NOT IN we are...."

“Come on, Diamond, let’s go back to your place and have some tea..."

******

1) Right after its bouts of monster attacks and its incidents of mass panic-- which made for a confusing Venn diagram as the two issues actually seldom overlapped...
2) The brothers subscribed to the Foal Free Press. (Flam liked doing the crossword.)
By the time the paper-colts had unleashed havoc in the streets of Ponyville, Sweet Apple Acres was already wide awake and well on into the day.

There had been many changes at the old farm over the past few weeks; not the least of which was that the fields and orchards were now dotted with hired ponies. Celestia had kept true to her word; Sweet Apple Acres was now part of the Royal legacy and registered as a historical site,... which gave the Princesses all sorts of leeway on sending out workers to "properly maintain and upkeep" the farm. For the first time in many years the farm was staffed with enough hooves to do all the work.

The first shift was already up with the dawn and putting their hoof to the work; mending fences, rebuilding chicken coops and pig pens, or laying down new roofing on the farmhouse and the barns... or working on the new wing of the Apple farmhouse, or the new greenhouses. The old farm had never looked so good. Meanwhile the second was in the new longhouse, fueling up on a proper Apple farmhand breakfast before going out to join their coworkers.

There were even more ponies on the royal coin inside the farmhouse: kitchen staff to feed the crew, houseworkers to handle the laundry and housekeeping, even a live-in medic and nurses for the care of the workers... and not too coincidentally to provide Granny Smith with some much needed therapy after her hip surgery.

There had of course been a bit of kerfluffle when Big Mac and Granny Smith had clapped eyes on just how much help was being sent their way. The idea of being the recipient of so much "charity" had deeply stung their Apple pride. Celestia was no fool, though. She'd expected as much from them, and had already dealt with Applejack's own apprehensions, so she knew how to handle it. She made a point of emphasizing to Granny the importance of Sweet Apple Acres as a strategic reserve: it was after all the only farm in Equestria, or as far as she knew the entire world, that grew Zap Apples, and made a point of sending two or three agriculturalists to study the Zap Apple trees under Granny Smith's and Big Macintosh's tutelage.... and sent them bearing cuttings and seeds of Celestia's own golden apple tree and Luna's silver one, heavily emphasizing how VERY IMPORTANT it was that Granny oversee this particular project personally. And of course both Granny and Big Macintosh had been given official, multi-hinged double-jointed Royal titles of authority over the whole shooting match: Head Overseer, Head of Staff, Chief Executive and vice-executive, etc. and a nice long list of responsibilities and duties to go with them.

As to the "excessive" amount of help, she had played every card in her hoof for that one. Nearly all of the staff moved here could claim at least a distant relationship to the Apple clan... Nepotism? No no no, merely preserving a legacy. Nopony walked through the front gate without at least three different careful rationalizations bordering on polite fictions as to why they were there, ranging from youth employment programs to "veteran transitioning to civilian life" to "interns getting professional training" to legal necessities for minimal staffing (one HAD to have a maintenance stallion for a Royal Legacy site, it was the LAW after all), et cetera. Granny had given some of the justifications for all the workers swarming everywhere the hairy eyeball, and Big Macintosh had traded more than one amused, knowing look with the Princess of the Sun, but in the end they'd accepted the excuses.

The Apple family would just have to get used to the terrible, heartbreaking burden of lots and lots of hired help and a life of relative ease.

It hadn't hurt that some of the staff had let slip that, even as hard as the Apples were working them, many of them regarded this as a plush post compared to their previous service or prior hardships. The work was demanding but simple, the pay excellent, the bosses decent, the townfolk friendly, and
they ate like kings thanks to Granny Smith's demanding standards and generous hoof at the table.

Up at "the Big house," though, there were a few guests who were less than happy about their circumstances. What was a dream job for most of the staff, Pennyworth and his little herd could only regard Sweet Apple Acres as a special circle of Hell. The colts and fillies, children of nobility, nouveau riche and privilege, had never done a day's physical labor in their lives, not so much as making their own beds. Since arriving they had been subjected to experiences... sights, sounds, and especially smells, OH the smells... that they had never imagined in their lives. Gone were the fancy clothes and jewels, gone were the primped manes and groomed coats, gone were the servants waiting on them hock and hoof. In their place? Waking at dawn, dressing in rough rags and crude boots, mucking in the dirt, pulling weeds, sweeping, mopping, cleaning, scrubbing, hauling bushels of apples, hauling bales of hay, hauling firewood, hauling tools to workers in the field, hauling things of every description back and forth till they were blue in the face... and if they gave any of the adults in charge of them any lip or back talk or balked in any way, the work load only doubled. It was an unending nightmare from which none of them could wake.

After the first week or so, after their calluses had thickened and their soft muscles had firmed, they could have downgraded their estimation of their torment to merely Grueling, from their initial estimation of Hellish. But what had landed on the table that morning had swung the needle clear back the other way and pegged it in place. Nothing, nothing could ever redeem them from the pit of Hades into which they had now been plunged, once they saw the front page of the newspapers.

While the field workers and such ate their meals down at the longhouse, the heads of staff-- including of course Granny Smith and Big Macintosh, and by necessity their six guests-- took their breakfast at the dining room table in the Apple farmhouse. It was there that they went over the plans for the coming day, and indulged in some good old social chewing of the fat over stacks of flapjacks and bowls of apple-cinnamon oatmeal. This new little tradition had gone a long way in soothing the heartache the two remaining Apple family members had felt at seeing Applebloom and Applejack's empty chairs across the table every morning. And, of course, each morning was greeted with a pile of newspapers as the various heads of staff of the Sweet Apple Acres Royal Legacy Historical Farm caught up on the news from their home towns.

This morning, the chatter around the table was a deafening din, and every pony's nose, even Big Macintosh's, was buried in a newspaper. A distressing number of those papers had almost identical headlines on their front pages.

Pennyworth and his friends sat at the table, their food untouched, staring in horror at the pictures on the front pages all around them. The faces in those pictures stared back with cheery smiles that promised doom beyond their imagining. "It can't be real," Marzipan whimpered. "Somepony please wake me..."

Air Drop looked over at PennyWorth. Gears slowly turned in his head as he regarded PennyWorth's gallows expression. "This is bad... isn't it?" he said slowly.

A moment later, the Apple matriarch came rolling in, her wheelchair pushed by her live-in nurse. Greetings and congratulations rose up from the table to meet her. "An' a good mornin' to you-all," she said cheerfully, rubbing her bandaged hip. "Hoo, I'll be glad when ah kin git these bandages off an' be up an' about again... and whaddya all mean 'congratulations?' "

Big Macintosh didn't say a word. He just smiled and turned his newspaper around so Granny Smith could see the front page. Granny took the paper from him, her jaw all but hanging to the floor. "Sweet Apple Butter," she breathed. "Little Applebloom.... she..."

"Eeyup," was all Big Macintosh said. But the quiver in his lip and the tear of pride in his eye was
"Wow. It must run in the family, huh?" one of the ponies at the table joked.

"Looks like it runs in several families," another pony retorted, tapping the pictures of Sweetiebelle and Scootaloo.

Granny's expression of astonishment and pride suddenly turned into a scowl. Squinting, she began skimming through the paper, mumbling to herself. "Whut is it, Granny?" Big Macintosh asked.

"Didja see anythin' about their cutie marks in this here?" she asked Macintosh.

"They just ascended and you're wondering about their cutie marks?" the nurse said, puzzled.

"After all whut them three fillies has been through tryin' to git them cutie marks," Granny said, flipping the page and continuing her speed reading, "If'n they ascended and STILL ain't got 'em, there's liable to be mass injuries and propity damage."

"Page four of the Canterlot Clarion, Granny," a pegasus mare at the end of the table said, laughing. Multiple newspapers rustled; more than one sigh of relief went up as a triptych of three no longer blank flanks appeared. More than one amused chuckle went up at the obvious glee on the fillies' faces.

"Whooe. Well, ain't that sumpin," Granny chortled. "Right flashy cutie mark, too. Bet li'l Applebloom's kickin' her hooves off the ceilin' over that." She gave a raspy chuckle.

"Well congratulations all around, then," somepony said. "Two of your granddaughters are princesses now. Two!" Heartfelt applause and cheers went up. Granny looked at them all with a teary eye.

"They wuz allus princesses," she said, her eyes bright. "Jest now everypony else kin see it." The compliments and congratulations spread a wide smile on her face. Amidst all the good cheer, it didn't escape her notice that the youngsters at the table weren't sharing in the happy mood. In fact if she was any judge, they all looked like convicts who'd just heard their sentence now included a protracted tour of the moon's surface.

After over a century of life, Granny Smith was no fool. "Well, cheers an' applause don't feed no chickens," she said. "G'wan, y'all, we got us a big day ahead." Everypony shuffled to their hooves and headed for the door. "Not you lot," she said to the youngsters. "Sit back down. I want a word." Silently the Gala brats sat back down. "Give us a moment, Tender Care...?" The nurse left as well. Granny looked at the six over the table. Now," she said, tapping the paper in one hoof and giving them a knowing look. "care to tell me why you look like the milk cow jest died?"

The six gave each other sidelong glances. PennyWorth spoke up for all of them. "You don't need to pretend," he said sourly. "We know what you're doing. There's no need to rub it in."

"Rub whut in?" Granny said, suddenly mystified.

"You're going to ruin us now," Marzipan blurted, seeming on the verge of tears.

"Whut??"

"Hey, it's not like we're surprised," PennyWorth said, his casual tone failing to cover the bitterness in his words. "You got us dead to rights. You guys were already one of Princess Celestia's favorites, now you've got TWO princesses in your family. You can take any revenge on our families that you want now."
Granny's jaw dropped so far her false teeth nearly fell out. "Revenge??"

"That's why we're here, isn't it?" Ivy said bitterly. "So you can get even with us for picking on your granddaughters. Humiliate us, humiliate our families....Now you don't even have to ask Celestia for favors to get it; Babsy and Jackie and Apple Boom or whatever her name is can just order it done." She poked at one of the abandoned papers sullenly. "You'll have our families kicked out of the Manehattan upper crust in a week."

"I'm gonna miss bein' rich," Bullhorn said dolefully.

Granny Smith scowled and rapped the table with her hooftip. "My granddaughters wouldn't do any such thing--"

"So big deal, either them, or one of the other two," Ruby Drop sniffed. "It's all the same. One of them will decide to finish what you started by bringing us here....wrecking our family names." She cringed as she remembered how her father had bellowed at her for hours, ranting about how she'd wrecked their family's social standing and opportunities with her 'stupid antics.' She could well imagine the apoplexy he was undergoing this morning as he read the Manehattan paper and found out she'd bullied three princesses...

Down at the end of the table, Marzipan started to cry. Ruby Drop felt like she was ready to cloud up and rain herself. Bullhorn and Air Drop were snuffling; Even PennyWorth was struggling to keep a stiff upper lip.

"Hush up that nonsense!" Granny snapped, making them jump. "We didn't bring you younguns to Sweet Apple Acres to get revenge on you! We brought you here 'acause you six messed up, and you needed to learn a lesson or two!" They looked up. The expression their faces nearly broke Granny's heart. It was the expression of somepony who didn't believe, who couldn't believe that any mercy or forgiveness would ever be shown to them. Her own face, had she been able to see it, was a mix of anger, frustration, disappointment... and regret. "But it seems you-all learned all the wrong ones afore you even got here," she sighed.

Her face firmed up, her wrinkles settling into her all-too-familiar no-nonsense face. "Y'all are bein' foolish," she said. "Them fillies ain't like that. Their families ain't like that and the Apples ain't like that. Gwan, you lot. Go do your chores. Hain't nobody goin' to do nuthin' against you or yourn."

The colts and fillies pushed their chairs away from the table. "I'll believe it when I see it," Granny heard one of them mutter.

"You'll believe it 'cause I said it!" she snapped. "Now git a-movin'!" The Gala brats picked up the pace and hustled for the door.

Granny sat back in her wheelchair, groaning inside. "Come back on in, Tender Care," she said. She grumbled to herself as the peppermint-colored pony returned and started wheeling her through the house. "Lordy, what a mess," she said. "Whut kind o' ponies raise foals like that?"

"Ambitious ones, Granny," Nurse Tender Care sighed. "I've worked for upper crust families; it gets ruthless up there. You're expected to stab any back that gets turned to you... and children are just pawns for furthering the family's goals. " She shrugged. "They expect you to destroy their families' standing and reputation because that's what their family would do."

"An' they got no idear that there's any way different," Granny concluded sadly. "Whut a pity...

"I wuz raised better'n that," Granny said. "Fust thing ah wuz taught was that the good Maker wanted
us to care about our neighbor the way we cared about ourselves. Ah git the feelin' those younguns ain't never cared for any other livin' thing but themselves their whole lives." She brooded over that as Tender Care trundled her along. "I think I'm a-gonna have ta change my approach a mite with those six..."

"We'll see to that later, I think. Time for your therapy session, Granny..."

"Ugh..."

---

"What are we doing out here, Miz Smith?" Marzipan asked.

Marzipan was less than happy. Of the Gala brats, she was by far the prissiest, and she liked it that way. Thus far, over these horrible weeks, she had managed to wheedle, whine, beg or plead her way out of the more disgusting jobs around the farm, swapping out chores with the others or even taking extra ones to avoid dealing with the nastier bits of work.

Now it looked like Granny Smith, the horrible nag, had caught her out, and was about to take away that last little bit of comfort she had in this awful place...

Marzipan was standing inside a straw-littered stall, clad in those horrid boots and coveralls, her once-glorious mane stuffed rudely up under a shoddy straw hat, shifting back and forth uncomfortably. The old nag was outside the enclosure, sitting in her wheelchair and watching Marzipan's every move as if she expected her to bolt... Marzipan actually thought about it, but she had the dreadful feeling that the old bat would actually run her down in that wheelchair before she made fifty yards. She gulped as Granny gave her the gimlet eye.

"You're here 'cause I've decided yer ready to take on some new duties," Granny said, pushing the gate to the stall shut and latching it. "If ya do good, you MIGHT get a few more privileges round here. Like you MIGHT be allowed to go into town on th' weekend when Macintosh or th' hired help picks up our dry goods. You MIGHT maybe even git a li'l spendin' money of yer own fer whutever you like. Maybe. Depends."

Hope and desire sprang up in Marzipan's heart. Going into town... shopping... maybe even getting some makeup or mane fixings or some real shampoo... "O-okay," she said. "What is it?"

"Yer gonna be takin' care of some o' the pigs," Granny said, cool as a cucumber.

"PIGS??" forget shattering glass, Marzipan's shriek could have splintered plywood. "You want me to take care of a bunch of PIGS??"

"EEeyup," Granny said. She pointed down the length of the fence separating them. "Wheel me down yonder, Tender Care..."

Marzipan pulled her hat down over her ears, nearly tearing the brim. "I'm a daughter of a baron! I can't take care of a bunch of smelly, stinky, filthy PIGS!!"

"Sure you can," Granny said. "Applebloom done it, an' if a Princess-to-be could wrangle it, so kin you." She reached up and grabbed a pull-cord in her teeth. For the first time Marzipan noticed the sliding door at the end of the stall.
"You can't--!" Marzipan exclaimed in horror.

"Can so." Granny gave the rope a pull. The trapdoor slid up. "Git ready to say hello--"

"NOOOOOO!" Marzipan threw herself to the straw-covered floor, pulling her hat down over her eyes and howling in despair. Oinks and squeals came bearing down on her; they were everywhere! Hooves pattering in the dust and oinking and squealing and bodies jostling her and she was about to be trampled and...

Wait a minute....

Marzipan paused in her howling. There seemed to be a marked deficiency in the amount of trampling. Plus a lot less oinking than expected. And the jostling was more of a rather diminutive nudging... fearfully, she lifted up her head and peered out from underneath the wide, floppy brim.

A little round nose and two black button eyes looked back. "Hweek?"

Marzipan slowly sat up. Gathered up around her were three tiny piglets. Two of the pudgy little things were busy nosing about her hooves, looking for their promised dinner. The third was sitting back on its haunches and looking up at her with a puzzled look on its face. They had little curly tails and little floppy triangle ears and perfect upside-down heart shaped little noses in the middle of their pink faces. They all turned their adorable little faces up to her, heads tilted inquisitively.

It was instant piggy love.

"Oh. Ohhh..." Marzipan cooed in spite of herself. "They're the littlest piggies I've ever seen--"

"Gotcha," Granny Smith said. She cackled uproariously as Marzipan glared death daggers at her. "Well, don't keep 'em waitin,'" she finally said, pointing at the canvas bag by the gate. "Give 'em their breakfast!" Marzipan fumbled with the bag, finally pulling out three baby bottles. This got a whole new round of excitement out of the piglets, who began noodging up and squealing hungrily for all they were worth. Marzipan fumbled a bit more, finally managing to balance all three bottles in her fetlocks and cork all three greedy little mouths.

"Turns out mama pig had herself more piglets than we was expectin'," Granny said as the hungry piglets guzzled away. "These three were three more'n she could handle. So they're your responsibility. Yer responsible fer feedin' em, fer makin' sure they git shade in the daytime and a nice warm bed at night, fer muckin' out their pen when it's needed... leastwise till they're old enough to go in the pig pen with the older 'uns... for givin' em their medicine when they need wormed... everythin'.

She gave Marzipan a hard look. "You better remember this: Them piglets don't care if'n yer a baron's daughter or a duchess or a princess. All they know is that if they're hungry, it's 'cause you ain't fed 'em. If they're thirsty, it's 'cause you dint get 'em water. If they're cold or sick or injured-- that's all on you. An' no excuses or apologies you kin ever make up will mean a thing to a pig. Just whether or not you care for 'em. You're their whole world now, an' that's all that matters to 'em.

"There's a list o' chores you'll need to take care of on that pegboard over there," Granny said, pointing. "An' a schedule for feedin' em. You got any questions at all--don't be a fool. Ask me or Big Macintosh or any of the help. They'll tell you what to do... but yer to do it all yerself, an' they know it, so don't even bother tryin' to hornswoggle any of 'em into doin' it fer ya. Got it?"

"Yes ma'am," Marzipan said meekly.

"And this is on top o' the chores you already got, mind."
"What? But--"

"You think Mama Sow gets a break from all them other pig things she's gotta do? Think any farmer gits a free pass just cause the pigs are birthin' or the sheep are lambin' or the chicks are hatchin'? Put up or shut up; I kin allus find one o' yore friends to take this lil opportunity."

"I-- okay, okay."

"Good. Back to the house, Tender Care." The nurse got her rolling along, headed back to the farmhouse. "Dinner's in about an hour; be washed up when the dinner bell rings," Granny called over her shoulder.

"Yes'm." Marzipan turned her attention back to her pudgy little charges. "Ooh yes, you is a hungwy piggy..."

"You are terrible old lady," Tender Care murmured in her client's ear. "I think you scared a year's growth out of her."

Granny cackled. "Couldn't resist."

"Think it will work?" Tender Care said.

Granny mulled it over. "Fair to middlin' chance, I think," she muttered back. "A week or two will tell." She sighed and settled back in the wheelchair. "One down, five more to go..."
Chapter 54

The soon-to-be-former Mayor Fussbudget sat in the opulently furnished smoking room of his luxuriously appointed mansion and sulked. Perhaps, he groused to himself with his snout stuck in his cider, he should say THE MAYOR’S smoking room and mansion; as the investigation into the Thunderdome debacle advanced, it was looking less and less like he would make it to the end of this term. Tartarus, it was looking less and less like he would make it to the end of this week!

Gold Star was getting his own back, it seemed. After years of resentment from being ordered about by Fussbudget, the recent debacles must have seemed like Hearthwarming Day come early. The investigation was worming its tentacles into everything now, including a lot of records of political donations and government contracts that Fussbudget… hadn’t been too particularly scrupulous about scrutinizing.

Fussbudget scowled as he looked down in his glass. He hadn’t particularly cared back then; Still didn’t for that matter. So long as the right palms (or hooves) got greased-- minus a small service fee of course-- and the right laws and ordinances got passed and the right causes got funded, everyone was happy. And that meant ballot boxes stuffed full of his name. If the money came from questionable places, or went to questionable purposes, well that was none of his business. He was a politician, not an accountant.

And those that weren’t happy… well… he’d figured out long ago the real balance of power between politics, votes and money: In politics, you beg with money; you threaten with votes. He was careful to never say it out loud. He never even put the words “Protection” and “Racket” together in the same sentence. But while particularly loud noisy voting blocs could lead him around by the nose, those that were reluctant to contribute to the proper noble causes (such as his reelection fund) suddenly found that their businesses, jobs, and homes were falling under the baleful eye of city inspectors, usually with panniers full of fresh new regulations and ordinances Fussbudget had ego-stoked out of city hall in the dead of night. Nice city you have there, citizen; it would be a shame if anything happened to it.

When someone pays DaneGeld, it’s not the one with the Geld who has power over the Dane.

Of course, all that was now coming back to bite him right in both cutie marks. After the fiasco with the Nobody’s Fools, the local press had taken to portraying him as a petty, humorless martinet who abused his power to take spiteful revenge against anyone who slighted him-- even children, gasp, shock. But before the ink on that scandal had even dried, the Thunderdome disaster had struck. The discovery that the leader of the local branch of the Crownbreakers was not only a terrorist but was working right out of Fussbudget’s office must have had every editor for a thousand miles salivating. The Op Ed hacks had practically been trampling each other to be first out with a column describing Fussbudget as an oblivious, amoral opportunist who didn’t care who his political bedfellows were.

They were right, and that only infuriated him more.

So here he sat, under house arrest like several dozen other more or less influential ponies, gryphons, zebras, etc. Oh, not officially. But he had been informed in no uncertain terms that it would be taken very poorly if he was unavailable, and he had better not take any unexpected trips out of town for the immediate future. And there were city guards stationed at his front door… and his back door… and on his roof… and judging by their rather unfriendly expressions he was guessing that none of them had voted for him in the last election.

He refilled his glass and set it down on his desk, for once not caring if he used a coaster or not. At
least his nephew-- Prince Mach, dear Maker what a nightmare Fussbudget’s life had become!-- had not stuck his oar in yet. In fact after a day or so of excitement the newly minted alicorn prince had more or less vanished. Those parts of the daily papers that weren’t ranting about the disgraced Mayor were busy obsessing with where the Prince had gone, who was he with, what could he possibly be doing, et cetera ad nauseum. He had no doubt though that when dear little Mach One made his reappearance, he’d have a few words to drop about his beloved Uncle Fussbudget.

Rotten little hooligan. He should have never even considered taking him in. He never should have turned him over to that dotty old nag who lived Downhill. If he knew then what he knew now, he’d have sent the disrespectful little crippled brat off straight off to an orphanage. In Yakyakistan.

He drained his drink till he was looking out at the world through the rippled crystal at the bottom. As he lowered it, the entire world exploded in pink.

“HIEEEE!”

“AIEE!” Fussbudget nearly flipped backwards in his office chair. He can hardly be blamed; it was the inevitable reaction to having Pinkie Pie appearing in front of you from thin air. The party horns and explosion of confetti might have been overkill, though. She was leaning her entire body across the top of his desk, her forehooves hooked over the edge nearest him and her nose inches from his own, an enormous grin spread across her face. After a few seconds to check whether his heart was still beating, Fussbudget gathered the first few pieces of his scattered wits. “Yuh… your Highness?”

He quickly double checked; wings, horn, golden peytral and tiara, good, he’d gotten it right; this was one of the new ones. “Uhh, Princess… Pie?”

“That’s me,” she chirped.

He looked around. The door to the study was closed and locked, and all the windows were shuttered. “Where did you come from??”

She gave him a peculiar look. “Well I thought you were old enough that you already knew this,” she said with a way-too-innocent grin. “But when a Stallion and a Filly love each other very much--”

“I meant more recently,” he said flatly, cutting her off. Seriously?

“Ponyville.” Apparently not.

He rallied and tried again. “I meant, where were you just five seconds ago?” He tried to glance under the desk without taking his eyes off her. Was there a trap door in the floor or something?

“Oh… around,” Pinkie said, rolling her eyes and waving a hoof. “But that’s not important now. What’s important is, it’s time for your PARTY!” More horns and confetti, this time accompanied by balloons out of nowhere. Fussbudget eeped and jumped in his seat. This was getting to be too much!

“Party?” he asked.

“Oh yes,” Princess Pie nodded eagerly. “I spoke with your nephew Onesy, and I learned aaaaallll about you and him.” Her smile never changed. Fussbudget suddenly, and for no explicable reason, felt a surge of apprehension. “And so I decided it was time for your ‘Equestria’s Number Two Uncle’ party!”

“How… nice?” He said. He continued before he could stop himself. “Um, but aren’t those usually called “Equestria’s number One… er, whatever?”

“Oh no,” Princess Pie said. Her eyelids lowered and her smile briefly vanished. “You’re definitely
Number Two.” Another blink and it was back. “So let’s get this party started… heeere’s your cake!” she hopped back off the desk and waved a flourish with her forehooves; there lying on the top of his antique oak administrator’s desk was a large rectangular sheet cake. It was decorated in white frosting and covered with blue and yellow buttercream flowers and sugary scrollwork down the sides. Burnt out candles were studded across its surface.

Written across the top were the words “Happy Birthday Mach One” in inch high blue frosting. With growing existential dread he realized he recognized that cake. The Princess of Laughter cut an enormous slice and plopped it on a paper plate. “Here you goooo…”

He took the plate and fork, his eyes never leaving hers, and tremulously took a bite. He promptly spat it out. “This is paper mache’!” he said, a strip of newsprint hanging off his mustache.

“Eeyup!” Princess Pie’s grin grew wider. “I heard about the last birthday party you threw for little Onesy, and how you both missed out on it all. That was sad.” She pouted. “So I thought ONE of you should get to at least enjoy that lovely cake you had made for him. So I made another one just like it.” Her smile grew far too wide and far too shiny for anything normal to have. Her pupils grew into enormous black holes as her eyes bugged out. “And it’s aaaaall for you.”

He bolted, the swivel chair spinning like a dervish behind him. “Hey! Where do you think you’re going?” Pinkie Pie demanded. He didn’t look back; he lunged for the double doors to his study, yanked them open, and dived through---

And found himself flopping on the floor at Pinkie Pie’s feet. “Now that was rude,” she said. “You just can’t leave--” He ignored her and leapt to his hooves, running back out the double doors--

And this time he popped out of one of the drawers in his own desk, flipping over in the air and landing sprawled out in his office chair, wheezing in shock. “As I was saying,” Pinkie continued as if nothing untoward had happened. “You just CAN’T leave. Not until you finish it all.”

Her meaning was not lost on him. His eyes darted from the mad Princess to the now closed doors and back again. “All of it?” he said in disbelief.

“Every. Last. Bite.” She enunciated.

“I’ll be poisoned!!” he gabbled.

“Pssh, Nawww,” Pinkie waved a dismissive hoof. “It’s just paper and flour. Won’t hurt a thing. It'll just pass on through.” She smirked humorlessly. “Eventually. And you might pee blue a while from the printer’s ink... eh.” She shrugged. “You'll live. Now eat up.” Her smile was wide but her eyes were slitted.

Shakily, he picked up the plate and the fork. He hesitated.

“EAT!!” The Pink Terror roared. Her hair deflated, falling around her ears in razor-straight locks, as fire burned in her eyes.

Whimpering, he crammed the first bite into his mouth, chewed, and swallowed.
Luna looked over her shoulder as the doors to the royal cabin opened. “Ah, there thou art, Pinkie Pie,” she said. “Where hast thou been? Thou wert almost late for our nightly lessons.”

“Oh... around,” Pinkie said. She flopped across one of the beds on her belly. “What’s the latest word on the new Prince and Princess?”

“Oh, they are doing quite well,” Luna chuckled. “Though they do rankle a bit under the new lessons in regal bearing and etiquette.” She sighed and set her brush down. “Tis sad that poor young Mach One had such a... less than gentle childhood,” she said. “I hope that good Sir Gold Star is successful in his prosecutions against that irresponsible rapscallion of an uncle. To think that such ponies rule in our land!” She snorted. “That he retains his title even now-- I fret that he will find some new mischief to get into--”

“Naah,” Pinkie said. “He’s gonna be too busy the next few days.”

“With what?” Luna said, curious.

Pinkie’s smile was positively diabolical. “Sitting on the throne, learning about the Power of the Press,” she said.

From somewhere in the distance, there was a long groan and a flushing sound.
Chapter 55

The coffee machine took a slow eternity to fill the cup. Gold Star slouched half-awake next to the oversized vending machine, poking at the selection buttons as if to hurry the machine up. He grumbled to himself about how the old fashioned percolator in the office had worked so much better, none of this automated mocha-latte-grande-vente nonsense, and how it was criminal having to pay a bit every morning for his cup of Joe. The watch ponies in the office politely ignored him. Not that anyone in the City Watch building would have understood him had they listened; the entire diatribe about the injustice of fancy schmancy coffeematics was delivered in Gold Star's well known it's-what-o'clock-in-the-morning incomprehensible grumble. Loyal to his duty or not, in all his years Gold Star had never gotten over his resentment at having to get up with the sun, and his coworkers and subordinates had learned to take his mandatory early morning growling litany with good humor.

The styrofoam cup finally filled up. Fumbling, Gold Star picked it up in the crook of his wing. Coffee retrieval achieved, he shuffled his way to his office in a half-sleepwalk---they could make him rise, but by the powers that be, they could never make him shine---and slid behind his desk. There. At long last he could begin the process of truly waking up. He pulled his coffee to him, oh bittersweet nectar of life, and took a long sip. Before the first sip was done his eyes were already starting to open.

It was indeed unfortunate what his newly opened eyes fell upon first.

"Commish!" Cookie Spritzer said, pronking into the office through the open door, his wings flapping excitedly. "You're not gonna believe this--!" He parted his forelock, revealing his horn. 

Horn....??? A fine mist of coffee sprayed over his desk blotter.

It had been an inevitable bit of fallout, what with all the interviews, interrogations, and reports that had to be conducted with all of them that they should be about the place, but since the debacle with the Mayor, and the subsequent loss of their not-so-secret lair, the Nobody's Fools had taken to hanging about (Gold Star resisted the impulse to think the word "loitering") around the City Watch building. Gold Star suspected it was sort of their way of making peace with the Watchponies for whom they had been such a nuisance for so long. The troops seemed to have taken a little bit of a liking to the scamps; it was kind of hard not to, really. Even the ones who'd been given the most grief--and bruises--had thawed out towards them a bit. He still found himself hoping to high heaven they'd find a new clubhouse soon, though.... their presence could be a little disruptive at times.

Disruptive, he decided as he gawped at the pegasus graffiti artist's new horn, was a horrible underestimation on his part.

"...and there was a big flash of light and then, bam! This!" The colt was saying. "I can't believe it, can you?" Before Gold Star could re-hinge his jaw and respond, there came a clippity-clop of galloping hooves from outside and Crackerjack came skidding through the door.

"Commish, commish, you ain't gonna believe this--" the little red colt's new wings flapped in the wind from the desk fan.
"Holy cow, you too?" Spritzer yelped in glee. Gold Star's eyes bugged out.

Then Softy, Presto and Bowser tumbled in. Wings and horns on all of them.

"Mister Commissioner Gold Star, sir, I think we need to see the Princess--!"

Presto doffed his belled hat, looking up at his horn gleefully. "...I can't wait to see what I can do with THIS--"

"Awooo!"

Wheezer staggered in. He leaned against the door with one hoof and pointed back and forth at his new horn and wings, gasping for air...

Foster galloped in next, his face a comedy of alarm, his eyes crossed and staring in shock at his obviously very new horn. "Commish, I think I need to report myself for grand theft species...!"

Commissioner Gold Star's shriek of horror would have been the pride of any movie scream queen.

There was a blinding flash of light. Gold Star choked in mid-scream. It was Fledge; the gryphon pup was hovering in the doorway, an enormous camera in his claws and a crap-eating grin on his face... and a horn sticking out of the feathers on his forehead. "Gee, it must be catching," he said blithely, looking up at his horn.

Gold Star gaped like a stunned flounder. "Whaaaaaa...?" He glared with bulging eyes at Foster, who was grinning like a cat in cream. The others were just as bad off; several were turning red and threatening to explode. He leaned over his desk and glared at Foster's forehead. "Is that GLUE??"

That did it; the dam burst. The Nobody's Fools exploded into howls of laughter. Several of them collapsed to the floor, fake horns askew, wings of dyed chicken feathers flopping loose and rapidly shedding plumage. Spritzer and Crackerjack disappeared entirely below the line of the desk top, rising into view every now and then with tears rolling down their faces only to sink out of sight again as they succumbed. Fledge had fallen out of the air like a gunshot buzzard and was lying on his back next to Foster, both of them bicycling their back feet in the air. "Best... Prank.... EVER!" Fledge squawked.

"How are we EVER going to top THIS one?" Foster lamented, giggling like a maniac.

"Dunno," Fledge answered, looking gleefully at his camera, "But I'm gonna make a MINT selling prints of this photo--!"
Gold Star rested his forehead on his desk. "I hate you all, you know that," he said wearily.

"Aww, you know you love us," Foster said, placing a danish and, thank all heavens, a fresh cup of coffee on the desk in front of him. Gold Star took both with ill grace and glared at them all.

"Haven't you all found a new clubhouse yet?"
Chapter 56

Mach One stood outside the glass double doors and checked himself over one last time. Mane and tail combed, coat groomed to a glossy sheen, a quartet of pegasus royal guards in full uniform flanking him, and a hastily custom made silver coronet resting on his brow around his new horn. He was thankful to Princess Rainbow Dash for all the help and advice… he was also thankful he’d managed to talk her out of the ermine-trimmed robe. It woulda been cool… but it would have been too much, really. Plus, it would have hid his wings.

Rainbow Dash could have handled this, he reflected. But she’d made a convincing argument or two why not; she’d already raised a rumpus or two overthrowing a passel of the ex-Mayor’s unlawful injunctions AND yanking the reins on the staff at the Alicorn Academy. She needed to take it easy for a while, while he needed to establish his bona fides as a prince. So it was his turn to swing the big hammer.

He nodded to the pegasi on either side. “Let’s do this,” he said, and pushed the swinging doors to the Windy City Flightless Foal’s Clinic open.

The timing was perfect. A small herd of ponies in business suits, obviously the boardmembers, supervisors and administrators of the Clinic, were just entering the lobby on their way to lunch, when the glass doors swung open and a jet-black alicorn prince, complete with retinue, came striding in. The heads of staff came to a halt as if their hooves had been glued to the floor. The mare in the middle was the first to regain her voice. “Y-your Highness? Prince, ah...”

Mach One snapped his wings out, one feathery and midnight black, the other of glittering crystal-like magic. “Prince Mach One,” he informed her. “Are you the administrative board for this facility? Good. We have a few announcements to make. Wouldn’t do to have to repeat it.”

One of the pegasi guards stepped forward, opening a royal scroll with his wingtips. He cleared his throat and began to read. “Per the financial agreement accorded between the shareholders of the institution herein named as the Windy City Flightless Foal’s Clinic and His Majesty Prince Mach One, sponsorship and title of the aforementioned Clinic are, as of this date, moved the possession of the Crown Prince Mach One, said institution henceforth to be known as the Windy City ROYAL Flightless Foal’s Clinic, in perpetuity, for the betterment of all of Equestria.”

Mach held up a hoof, making him pause. “Aaand we’ll leave off reading all the fine print, but you get the idea.” He smirked as the scroll snapped shut.

The glee on the administrators’ faces was almost nauseating. To anyone who knew them it was
obvious what was running through their minds. A royal sponsorship! This would rejuvenate their fading elite status, probably to unheard of new heights! They would surely be given direct access, not unlimited but surely generous access, to the coffers of the Crown…

His Royal Majesty’s next words brought their glorious daydream crashing to the ground. His eyes were heavily lidded and his voice was a bland monotone. “By the way, here’s the footnote: you’re all fired.”

“Waaaah…?”

“I say, what’s all this?” Doctor Hospice trotted into the room, peering about curiously at the horrified expressions of his erstwhile colleagues. His gaze drifted across Mach One and he feigned surprise. “Oh, hello again your Majesty. What brings you by today?”

“Hello, Dr. Hospice. I’m just here giving them notice of a few things. Like the fact they’re fired. Oh, you’re the new chief administrator by the way.”

“Why thank you, your Majesty,” Dr. Hospice said with an innocent grin. The shocked ponies turned accusing eyes on Dr. Hospice The three ex chief administrators’ eyes in particular went round, then slitted with rage as the copper bit dropped. None of them said it, but you could still read it on their faces; “You KNEW.”

Dr. Hospice’s crap-eating grin was as good as an affirmation. “Oh, that seems a bit excessive, Prince Mach,” he said. “After all we will still need staff, and they’re… medically adequate doctors…” the ponies’ glares turned poisonous. “And they at least know their way around the paperwork.”

Mach One rolled his eyes. “Fine, fine,” he said. “If you think you need them.” He gave the three a squinty eyed look. “On a probationary status.” The herd of bureaucrats relaxed slightly.

“And on a reduced salary. Fifty percent.”

“What ??” one of the stallions yelped.

“You’ll need the funds to hire new staff. Nurses, aides, doctors, orderlies… actual medical ponies, in other words. I want the Clinic to pursue an aggressive treatment policy like we discussed earlier.”
“Of course,” Dr. Hospice nodded. Neither he nor the Prince felt like stating that the ‘discussion’ consisted of the good Doctor outlining, in detail, his own plans and ideas and the new Prince signing on the dotted line.

“And get in contact with Our Lady of Sunrise, over in Manehattan,” Mach One continued. “I want to set up a partnership with them, let them bring their expertise to the Clinic.”

Seeing things sliding out of their grasp, the former administrators fell back on their last available resource: the condescension of elders. “Now, young man,” Dr. Catheter said, her face wreathed with a smile dripping with false sweetness. “I know how reactionary the young can be, but, really, what could a therapy clinic possibly have to share with a research hospital?”

“I dunno, patients?” Mach One said drily. He snapped his translucent wing out; it shattered into a cloud of sparks and disappeared. “Remember this, Doc?” He wiggled the stump at them in a nauseating fashion. “I went through your system a while back, in case you forgot.”

The doctors winced. The portly blue one actually looked a little chagrined. “Yes, I… remember that,” he said. “It was unfortunate, but the surgeons confirmed that the wing was inoperable, and that the circulatory problems would make it dangerous to keep… they had to amputate….”

“Really? I wonder,” Mach said, his voice cold. “I wonder if it really was inoperable, or whether you lot did what you do all the time now: give up.”

Several of the ponies addressed bristled. Only one or two, Mach noted silently and with disappointment, had the grace to look chastised. One of them actually winced. “We did the best we could at the time,” he protested. “There really was no hope…”

“Yeah, well, take another look, Doc,” Mach said. He turned sidewise so they could see the stump better. Something in his tone made the doctor peer closer. His eyebrows nearly rose off his head. “That’s… it’s articulated,” he said in surprise. “They’re small, but-- metacarpus, ulnare, radiale-- the two major joints-- but-- but it was amputated to the humeral joint, clear to the shoulder!”

It was as if decades of soul-souring work in executive suits fell away; the doctors crowded close, eager to see this medical miracle. “Are those pinfeathers?” The one in the tweed suit said, astonished.

“Yes, yes they are-- tiny, but they’re there!” The mare of the trio looked up at him. “He’s
regenerating his wing. I always suspected as much of alicorns-- were they not able to regenerate, to heal completely, Celestia and Luna would be a riddled mass of old injuries, scar tissue and missing teeth, just from the cumulative effects of living thousands of years. But what could this mean for the clinic?”

Mach One sighed, visions of poking and prodding and needles ahead. “I’m going to be submitting myself to the doctors for study. That means--”

“It means,” Dr. Hospice continued for him, “That we not only have an alicorn available for medical study, one who is undergoing spontaneous limb regeneration, but we have his complete and comprehensive medical records available, both before and after his transformation to an alicorn.”

Mach could almost see the implications sinking in, the metaphorical dust being blown off long-unused medical minds. “The avenues for treatment we could unlock…!” one of them murmured.

Mach nodded. “Treatments, and cures.” He settled his wings-- one whole, one budding-- against his sides. “Mares and Stallions, things are going to change around here.”
Chapter 57

Mach's great grandmother Doppler had been a firecracker in her younger days, getting into every sort of trouble and misadventure a mare could—and quite a few most back in those days said a young mare shouldn't or couldn't. Her parents, her neighbors, even the law spent a fair amount of time pulling their own manes out by the roots thanks to her, and her laughing over her shoulder at them all the while. She'd even hung out with a gang of rapscallions much like the Nobody's Fools at one time... There had been days back then when it seemed like she was going to set the whole world alight. It was small wonder she and her great grandson got along so well.

Of course, the years had quenched much of that firecracker spark; Granny Doppler had nurtured that spark, banked the coals to a cozy glow and now spent her days toasting her hooves at a hearth full of warm memories—and refreshing it on occasion with stories of her great grandson's shenanigans. She rarely worried about him when he was out and about; he was like her, born to be wild and free. But the last few days... she'd worried.

He hadn't been home in several days. He hadn't sent any message home; she hadn't heard from the neighbors or from the Guard or from anybody. She assumed that he was safe—no news was good news after all—but she'd started to notice, even with her cats all around her, how quiet and empty the house seemed to be...

It was raining. It had been raining on and off for almost three days now, ever since that ruckus, something to do with the new Cloudiseum? Her neighbors had been babbling about it but they weren't very clear. Apparently there'd been some sort of accident and it had broken apart? And all this rain was the result. Not that she minded much; she'd always been partial to a good rainstorm. She sat in front of the wood stove, listening to the rainfall drumming on the roof, stroking one of her many cats and watching the flames through the grate. Where could the colt be?

There was a knocking at the front door, then the sound of it opening. Even before she heard his voice she knew it was him; only Mach One knocked like that right before walking in anyway. The door opened and in he came, covered in a rain poncho and dripping all over the carpet. "Gran Gran!" He called. "I'm home!"

She was there with a beaming smile and a neck-hug, wet poncho or no."So here you are," she said with a chuckle. "You've been gone for two nights, young stallion, that's a bit too long with all that's--hello, who's this?" behind her grandson stood a mint-green mare peeking out from under her raincoat hood.

"Oh, ah, this is Green Leaf," Mach said, looking over his shoulder at her. The mare nodded in greeting. "She's... well, she's one of the home care ponies who's going to be helping out around here."

"How do you do, Ma'am," Green Leaf said politely.

Doppler looked at Mach in confusion. "Home care...?"

"Just... just to help out around the house a bit," Mach reassured her. "Housework, shopping...I know
"Silly boy," Grandma chided. "It's sweet of you, but how can we possibly afford-- Mach??" She stood gaping in awe; Mach had shrugged off his rain poncho at last-- revealing his wings. His two wings, one flesh and blood, one ghostly crystal. And the ebon horn rising from his forehead. She raised a trembling hoof to his forehead, not daring to believe her eyes. "Mach... what...??" She ran her hoof over his magical wing and looked up at him, tears of joy in her eyes. "Your wings...!"

Mach smiled gently as he embraced her in his wings-- she couldn't help but run her hoof over the glassy feathers in wonder-- as his poncho floated up and hung itself on the coat peg. "In case you didn't guess, Granny, a lot of things have changed lately," he said. "You took care of me all these years. Now I'm going to take care of you."

"But... this... how?"

Mach gave her a lopsided grin. "It's been a REAL interesting weekend, Granny..."

***

"This place is the BOMB!" Crackerjack said.

"Please don't say 'bomb'," Softy said anxiously. "Lately that's just asking for trouble."

"Let's just say he's done well for himself," Presto said. "Well done, Machster."

The Nobody's Fools were taking a tour of Mach One's new domicile. A bit of debate had gone on where the newest Prince would reside-- some wanted him to go straightaway to Canterlot; others had suggested (strongly) that he join the Tour. In the end he had decided to stay in Windy City; it was his home, first and foremost, and where all his friends were. It was also where the lion's share of the researchers lived who would be poking and prodding him to analyze his metamorphosis. For lack of a proper palace, the Crown had leased one of the towers on Scholar's Peak from the University. It was, as it so happened, one of the older parts of the campus, formerly used in its heyday to house VIPs such as visiting nobility. A great deal of dust had been displaced and the Royal Tower was fitted out in style. More than a few laboratories on campus had gotten the dust blown off them, too, as the various academics and scholars in the University realized this would put them in easy access of one of the most coveted research subjects alive.

Mach was starting to wonder if the plush living quarters were going to be worth it... "Not like I did anything," he shrugged as the others ran up and down the stairs, poking their noses in every room. "The Princesses said 'boo' and everyone was trottin' double time to get this place set up for me."

Spritz was galloping down the stairs. He trotted to a halt on the landing next to Mach, looking doubtful. "You're... still gonna hang with us, right, Mach?" he said. "Now that you're royalty and all, I mean--"
Mach got him in a headlock and noogied him. "What, you're trying to throw me out of the clubhouse already?" he teased as Spritz yelped and squirmed in annoyance. "You're not gettin' rid of me THAT easy."

Foster snorted. "Well, it's not like we have a clubhouse to throw you out OF, anymore," he said.

Mach grinned oddly. "Just remembered something," he said. "Got something to show you all. Yo, Fools! Follow me!" he shouted. After a few minutes the Fools came tumbling out of the various rooms and down the stairwells to cluster around their leader. Without a word Mach led them downstairs, down the stairwell that spiraled around the inside of the tower; to the first floor. Then to the basement. By the time he reached the bottom, he had their curiosity well roused.

They found themselves crowded in a narrow space, in front of an oddly familiar door. Mach summoned the key from his haversack with his magic (shrugging apologetically at Presto's envious look) and unlocked it-- sending the key flipping over to Zonk. Everypony squeezed through behind him. Zonk was the first to speak. "Hey, this basement almost looks like our old hideout..."

Spritz corrected him. "Holy hay, it IS our old hideout!" The gang scattered in every direction to examine everything.

It really was their old hideout. It was not surprising they had taken so long to recognize it; the crews that had been sprucing up the Royal Tower had been busy down here as well. The walls and ceiling had been given a fresh coat of paint; the stone floor had been tiled over and was covered with colorful throw rugs, warm and fuzzy underhoof. The stairwell had been repaired, and the rickety scaffolding that they had used to split the circular room into two floors had been replaced by a proper wooden balcony, all the way around. The clotheslines and ratty curtains that had parceled up the main floor were replaced with rolling dividers. Even the old coal furnace sitting in the middle of the room had been replaced with a shiny new gas one (surely more for the benefit of those upstairs, of course.)

Their belongings were all in their regular places: Wheezer's books and comics were in his nook, stacked neatly on shelves; Soft Touch had a new sewing machine and piles of cloth and cotton fill in his corner; Zonk's makeshift repair shop-- a scattering of tools, skateboard wheels and the like-- was now a proper wall rack of tools and a work bench; Presto's laboratory had proper shelves and rows of beakers, bottles, and bunsen burners... and a nice stout door with a lit "do not enter" sign. Even Spritz's collection of rainbow paints and sprayers were there, fully stocked and stacked on their own set of shelves. Even the much beloved "secret entrance" had been upgraded-- hidden behind an enormous Wonderbolts poster that swung out on hinges.

Everypony gathered together on the main floor, staring at Mach in awe. "You set this all up for us?" Crackerjack said.

"Hey, the Fools were here first," Mach protested. "The way I see it, one of us just took up tenancy on the upper floors for the first time."
"Holy cow," Foster remarked suddenly. "We've been living at the corner of Swank and Posh all this time and never knew it!"

"Welcome back, guys," Mach said.

The group scattered to check out their "new" digs. Mach knew this happily-ever-after wouldn't last forever. The gang would eventually split up and go their separate ways; Foster would hit the big time on his one-night comedy gigs and move out. Crackerjack would start spending more and more time at his new dojo, and less and less time at the Fool's Rush Inn (so dubbed, tongue in cheek, by Foster.) Presto was already corresponding with that magical researching couple in the Crystal Empire and it looked likely he would be moving far away to pursue his apprenticeship. And Mach himself would someday have to pass the mantle of leader on as he grew into his new role and responsibilities as a Prince.

But there would be a mantle, and somepony whom he could pass it on. Thanks to him (and to the Princesses), this place would always be there now. There would be new colts (aaand maybe a few fillies like Scootaloo, he amended with a mental smile) who would join the club, to carry on the tradition of pranking and stuntimg and fast friendship. And he and the rest of the old guard would be around... here and there, now and then... to make sure the torch got passed along.

Be sure and check out My Patreon and My Home Website for more of my original art and other work...
Chapter 58

Lightning flashed and thunder boomed. And at the window, the melon lurked.

The first that Spike was aware of it was as he was busy hedgehogging about the room at the Inn, buttoning up against the oncoming storm. The weather in Hollow Shades was never exactly sunny and dry, in fact it alternated primarily between the extremes of 'misty drizzle' and 'downpour.' But a roaring thunderstorm demanded a certain amount of attention even here.

Thus it was that Spike, who had opened the few windows during a brief period of...well, slightly less gloomy twilight; one would be hard pressed to call it 'sunshine'... in hopes of airing the place out, had returned to the room to find wind and the first sputterings of rain blowing in through the open windows. He was now hurrying about, trapping windblown papers and other oddments and trying to shutter the windows against the howling wind.

He came to the last open window just as a flash of lightning illuminated the night, and nearly had a heart attack as the silhouette of some cloaked-- or bat-winged-- thing stood out in stark contrast in the window frame. "Yaigh!" he squawked, leaping backwards. A moment later though the light outside faded and the lanterns inside steadied, revealing, of all things, a watermelon sitting on the windowsill,... a watermelon with a black, scalloped cloak tied around its stem for some reason. Spike let out a whooshing sigh of relief. "Nearly scared the fewmets outta me," he muttered to himself. He tilted his head to one side and regarded the melon. "Huh. Late night delivery, I guess?"

(1) A gust of rainy wind reminded him of his current task. "Come on in, you..." He quickly grappled the melon out of the window (it was nearly as large as he was) and lugged it over to the table, then ran over and shuttered and bolted the window shut against the rain.

"Whew, that takes care of that," he said, dusting off his hands. "Now, let's see what to do with this--melon?" Spike stared, his brow furrowing. He was certain he'd placed the watermelon on the near end of the table; now, it was clearly on the far end, sitting next to the complimentary fruit basket (A rather nice one, with several bananas and a whole honeydew melon atop it. It was surprising the goodwill that bringing a baby phoenix to town had generated) the hotel management had sent up. Looming over it, almost.

"Huh." Spike walked around the table and gave the melon the once-over. It wasn't exactly a perfect specimen; it was slightly lopsided, and it had some lumpy looking scars or seams on one side. If you looked at them right they almost looked like slanted eyes and a crooked, jagged line for a mouth that made it look like it was leering at the virginal fruit basket next to it. The emerald green skin glistened as drops of rain slid down it.

It almost looked like it was drooling.

Spike gave the melon a thump with a knuckle. It gave a hollow thud. "Good and ripe anyway," he said. "Well, might as well slice it up for dinner. Now where'd I put that cleaver...?" He began fishing through the panniers and backpacks for his culinary kit.
The dew beading on the watermelon, had he looked, now rather looked like nervous sweat.

There was a thump and a rolling noise behind him. He wheeled about, instrument of melon-chopping mayhem in his claw. "What? Who's there?" He looked about. Noone was there... but neither was the melon. There was however a trail of rain droplets from the table to the sofa that disappeared underneath. "Ah, musta rolled off the table. Lucky it didn't break when it hit the floor," Spike said. He crouched down and looked underneath the dingy loveseat. There it was; he could see the semi-roundish shape pressed back in a corner.

It was then that Spike realised two things. One: How had the watermelon squeezed itself under the couch and past the padding and undersprings to that corner? And two, the melon in question was glaring at him. With two hollowed, coal-red eyes like the eyes of a jack-o-lantern.

"Whaa?"

The watermelon opened its jagged, halloween pumpkin mouth and hissed.

"Waaaagh!!" Spike performed a spectacular rapid retreat across the room. He saw a growling, hissing lump scuttle... roll, that is... or more of a hunching-- look it just moved, okay? It was hard to tell what sort of locomotion it was using with that black cape flapping around, but it was certainly fast. It shot from under the couch and disappeared into the shadows behind the nearby overstuffed chair.

Spike dropped the cleaver and grabbed the broom leaning against the corner... then after a moment's recriminating himself as an idiot, picked the cleaver back up, wielding it in one hand and the broom, awkwardly, under one arm. "Come on out!" he yelled with fake bravado at the easy chair. "I'm armed and dangerous, I know kung pao, moo gu gai pan, uhh--"

There was a loud thump behind him. He whirled about as best he could, his makeshift weapons throwing him off balance. There on the table behind him, looming over him, its scalloped cape spread like bat's wings, stood the melon, it's carved out eyes and mouth burning like hellfire.

"AAAGH!" The cleaver in Spike's hand spun in an arc so beautiful it would have brought a tear to a shogun's eye and embedded itself in the wood of the table. The monstrous melon unfortunately had dodged at the last second. It was now rapidly fleeing, in a series of short, rapid little hops on its bottom, across the room as Spike struggled to pull the blade out of the table.

Swearing in Yakyakistani(2), Spike gave up on the knife. He switched his broom to a two-clawed grip and spun about (clearing a nearby shelf neatly of all its knick knacks) and faced the foe.

The watermelon reached the far wall and leaped for the window. And fell short by half. It leapt again with similar disappointing results. Mind, it was a remarkable standing high jump for something with
no legs, but it was still an obvious fail. "Hah!" Spike crowed. The dragonling charged.

Just as he was about to impale the watermelon on the blunt end of his broom-- either that or sweep it to death-- it disappeared in a burst of smoke. When the foul-smelling cloud cleared all that remained was a tiny fruit bat, who promptly flapped up to the window, deftly undid the latch with its foot, and with a crash of thunder and flash of lightning flew out into the blowing night.

It was then that Twilight and Flash Sentry returned and found Spike staring out into the the storm, his broom slack in his hands and his jaw hanging open."Spike, close the window!" Twilight yelped, turning her shoulder to the wind. "The rain is blowing in!" Her magic flicked out and latched the window; the outside shutter she missed unfortunately. Rain dashed against the glass as the shutter flapped.

Flash was a little quicker to size up the situation. "What happened here?" He said, eyeing the butcher blade stuck in the table and quickly looking around the room, his wings mantled and ready to flick their blades out.

Spike gawked at them. "It... it flew out the window!"

"What?" Twilight said, confused. She sent a tendril of her magic squeezing out through the window to try and pluck at the flapping shutters.

"The-- the watermelon!" Spike blurted.

That was a show stopper. Twilight and Flash stared at him, then glanced at each other. "The what??"

"Watermelon!" Spike gabbled, his tongue loosening. "It..." He snapped his fingers and smacked his fist into his palm. "That's it! That's what it was, it, it was one of those vampire melons Rarity's guards were talking about-- a real one!"

Flash's brows furrowed. "Spike, I know we all took a 'no arbitrary skepticism' oath when we first got here," he said. "But when you start to say things like that it gets difficult."

"No, no, I know this one," Twilight said, waving a hoof. "It's an old folk legend...You actually saw one?" she asked Spike, curiosity welling up.

"Yeah, I thought it was another gift," Spike said, nodding toward the fruit basket. "But then it had glowing red eyes, and a jaggedy fanged mouth.. well, sort of-- it even had a cape!"

"...A cape?" Flash's eyebrow raised a little higher.
"How would it keep the cape on?" Twilight said, distracted. "Watermelons don't have necks--"

"How would I know? it just DID!" Spike exploded. "Then it turned into a fruit bat and flew out the window!"

Twilight blinked. "Little fruit-colored thing, bat wings, green leafy ears?" she asked, recalling one of the pests in Applejack's South orchard. Spike nodded. "That... okay, Spike, that's just ridiculous."

"I dunno, makes sense to me. Though I would've thought a vampire fruit bat," Flash admitted casually. He holstered his crossbow (when had he drawn it? the other two wondered) and looked around. "So what was it doing here?" He walked over to the table and levered the cleaver back and forth. The blade popped out of the wood with a thunk.

"I think it was after the fruit basket," Spike said, pointing at the (for the moment) innocent centerpiece.

"Why would a vampire melon go after other fruit?" Twilight protested, eyebrows furrowing. Spike shrugged. "Why does a vampire pony go after regular ponies?"

"What, you think it wanted to EAT the fruit? Or... drain its juice, or something?" Twilight said.

"Or seduce it," Flash contributed. At Twilight and Spike's meaningful stares he added "Well, you know how vampires are about innocent maidens sleeping alone... Count Melonhead looks in through the window, sees that innocent honeydew melon sitting there on a bed of bananas and oranges and..." he tapered off, withering under their dual gimlet stares. "What? So I read gothic horror romance novels once in a while."

"This conversation is getting a little too weird," Spike muttered. "Even for us."

"Well, it-- or he-- is gone now," Twilight said. "Whatever it was."

"Vampire melon," Spike repeated.

"Or something you THOUGHT was a Vampire Melon," Twilight said, old arbitrary skeptic habits surfacing despite herself. "Or something imitating it. Remember the cannibal toaster?"

"The what?... he said, feeling terribly repetitive," Flash said, rolling his eyes.

"Never be in the neighborhood when Discord and Pinkie Pie collaborate on a prank," Twilight said dismissively.
"So what are we going to DO about it?" Spike demanded.

"Don't worry, Spike, we'll keep an eye out for it when we go out tonight," Flash reassured him.

"Wait, what?" Spike halted in his tracks. "We're going out tonight??"

"Once this rainstorm moves past, yes," Twilight said. "It's a big storm but it's a fast moving one, which means there'll be a clear period for a few hours afterwards. And the lunar cycle means the thaumatic resonances are ideal for-"

"Twilight, there are MELONS out there!" Spike was getting the feeling his rather close brush with the forces of Darkness and malevolent produce was getting the brushoff.

It was, actually; Twilight Sparkle was a mare who had faced down everything from paraspite swarms to herds of Pinkie Pie clones; reports of an encounter with a lone paranormal monster-cum-summertime treat wasn't going to turn a hair on her mane. "Note my rising panic at this news, Spike," she said dryly.

"We can handle timberwolves, I think we can handle one roaming melon, Spike," Flash said confidently, settling his own pack on his shoulders.

"When's the last time you saw just ONE melon in a patch, Flash?" Spike said, holding up a single claw.

"Don't worry, Spike," Flash said with a chuckle. "If we see it I'll just stake it through the heart with a crossbow." He thought that one over a moment. "Do Watermelons have hearts?"

"Well artichokes have hearts..." Twilight muttered. She was distracted trying to pull a backpack full of gear up onto her shoulders.

"I don't believe you two!" Spike said.

"What do you WANT us to do?" Twilight retorted. "So there's a vampiric and/or possibly perverted watermelon roaming around out there, stalking other fruit in the dead of night. What are you afraid it's going to do, spit seeds at us?" She rolled her eyes. "Unless you're a dragon FRUIT, I don't think you have anything to fear from it. Last I checked watermelons don't have teeth."

"Hey, you didn't have it HISS at you," Spike protested. "I think you are seriously underestimating the danger here."

Twilight sighed and rolled her eyes. "We've dealt with things a lot scarier than a melodramatic melon, Spike," she said. "We'll be fine." Spike groaned and threw his arms in the air. Twilight ignored his histrionics. "Anyway. We've been speaking to the neighbors--"
"Having Peewee along certainly opens a lot of doors around here," Flash noted.

"Where is he?"

"Down in the lobby, sitting in the fireplace to dry his feathers out."

"Ah."

"--And we've found three possible locations to start the alicorn search. "A closed-down old broom factory that used to be a prison, the abandoned hospital, and a hundred year old mansion on the northern end of..."

"MANSION," Spike said firmly.

"Why?" Twilight said. "Aren't you afraid we'll run into all sorts of ghosts and ghoulies in a haunted mansion?" Her voice was just a touch teasing.

Spike huffed, smoke puffing out of his nostrils. "Which do you think is going to have more ghosts--an old house that had maybe one family living there, or a PRISON that had dozens of ponies languishing in jail cells and a HOSPITAL with hundreds of dead and dying patients?" he pointed out. "Besides, if you were an alicorn in hiding, where would YOU want to sleep? Even a bedroom in a broken down old mansion has gotta be more luxurious to sleep in than a prison bunk, a factory floor or a hospital bed."

"Hmm, good point," Twilight admitted reluctantly. "Okay, we'll start at the mansion, at least tonight." She finally got her pack settled. "But I want to eventually calibrate at least at the other two sites to make triangulating easier..."

"Besides, I can't think of anything further from where a watermelon would hang out than an old dead rich dude's house," Spike added with deliberation. He shuddered. Hadn't he seen garden patches out behind most of the houses in the village...?

"We'll be FINE, Spike," Twilight said. "We've all got experience with all sorts of monsters, we're not exactly pushovers ourselves and we're armed to the teeth. I think we can handle whatever this place throws at us! Come on, get your stuff ready.. the stormfront should be passing in another hour."

Spike growled in a mix of exasperation and apprehension, and began going through his own backpack, muttering and mumbling the entire time-- making sure to put the garlic and the sharpened stakes on the outside pockets, where they would be easy to reach. No respect, that's what he got, no respect. Did any of the others on their own alicorn teams have to put up with this, he wondered?
"Yeah, this can only end well," he sighed.

Be sure and check out My Patreon and My Home Website for more of my original art and other work...

1) As weird as it was, Spike did not in fact smell a rat. In a rural town like Ponyville, leaving gifts of produce for new neighbors was a common tradition... and in Ponyville at least the pegasi had a bad habit of leaving drop-offs on second floor balconies and windowsills.

The less said about the habit of some of the more... obsessive... farmers to dress their prize produce in baby outfits, the better.

2) Spike was a well-read library dragon, and Yaks had an astounding list of remarkably simple-to-pronounce words for saying something upset them.
"UP AND AT 'EM BOYS!" Greywolf roared, brandishing a cutlass. "DEFEND THE SHIP! DEFEND THE PRINCESS!!" All over the ship Roughnecks cheered and brandished their weapons as they charged in to battle the pirates.

It had been an honest mistake. Applejack's ship, the Blossom, was at the moment too laden to rise over the mountain peaks. Rather than take a long course to their next destination, the Captain had made the executive decision to chart a shortcut through the mountain range lying in their way. This was terribly unfortunate. Unknown to the captain that range was the territory of a tribe of Diamond Dogs. Of course the subterranean creatures were not normally the concern of a zeppelin captain, but the mountains there had long been poor for mining-- and the tribe had resorted to taking a rather unusual lateral career path:

Air piracy.

Less than half an hour after the Blossom began weaving its way through the high craggy peaks, the Diamond Dogs' raggedy blimp hove to over the peaks and dropped down on them. In moments the Blossom was swarming with screaming Diamond Dogs rappelling down from above.

The fact that most of the Dogs were screaming in panic as they plummeted through the sky did little to amuse anyone on board the Blossom. Many of the would-be boarders had rather poor aim, however. Applejack had watched with horrified disbelief as about a third of their number missed the boat entirely. The sight of shrieking Diamond Dogs plummeting past the rails like bags of wet cement would haunt her nightmares for ages... She'd never been so relieved when the Dog's parachutes deployed. It didn't stop them from howling and ki-yi'ing all the way down, though...

As noisy as their impromptu skydiving performance was, there were more than plenty on the ship to keep her attention. Battles and swordfights were springing up everywhere on deck and up and down the rigging as the Roughnecks grappled with the would-be hijackers.

The Diamond Dog's rag-eared ship dropped in side by side with the Blossom, and dozens more Diamond Dogs boarded them. The fight soon surged back and forth across both decks and up and down through the tangled rigging, as both ships delivered punishing broadsides at point-blank range. The Dog's ship got the worst of it; the Blossom was an Equestrian battle zeppelin and had far thicker hulls and far more guns than the Dogs could muster. But strapped side by side as they were, with their rigging tangled, the Blossom couldn't bring her full firepower to bear-- didn't dare, as a scuttled Diamond Dog blimp would drag them out of the sky as well.

Everyone had taken up arms. Applejack herself was on the quarterdeck, a cutlass gripped in her teeth, fighting hoof and horn with what had to be the Captain of the pirate crew-- a tall female Diamond Dog with a coyote-like muzzle and dirty yellow fur, decked out in an enormous plumed hat and brass-buttoned coat. "Yarr, Pony," the pirate Dog sneered. "Your ship belong to Bonnie Garnet, now!"
"Like fun it does!" Applejack retorted through the hilt in her teeth. She was silently fuming at herself for not being more practiced at her magic. Unicorn magic was challenging enough, but at alicorn levels it was hard not to go all-or-nothing. She was having a hard time thinking up a spell that wasn't either barely enough to lift a table napkin or strong enough to blast half the deck to smithereens.

She probably should have gone for her lasso rather than the sword...

---BRUMMMMMMMM---

A rumbling growl like an enormous engine shook the air. The hatch on the main deck burst open and a huge mechanical THING, all gears and pistons and metal plates, came lumbering up from the hold. It was built something like a headless gorilla, with short stumpy piston legs, and huge arms that reached to its ankles and ended in huge, crude gripper claws. It climbed hand over hand up to the quarterdeck. The front of its broad metal chest had a row of vertical slots through which red light glowed like the coals of a furnace, and an array of tanks and pipes was bolted to its back. There was an open cockpit where the head should have been, and sitting in the cockpit...

"Applebloom?" Applejack yelled, dropping her cutlass. She snagged it out of the air with her magic before it hit the deck. "What're you doing??"

"Helping!" Applebloom said. She pushed a lever in the cockpit; the mechanical gorilla's torso spun around to face Bonnie Garnet and clacked its claws menacingly. "All right, GET AWAY FROM HER, YOU ---!"

This time Applejack DID drop her saber; it hit the deck with a clatter. "APPLEBLOOM!" she gasped. "MIND YOUR LANGUAGE!"

"What?? It's what she IS, it's the proper WORD," Applebloom said.

"Is correct," Bonnie Garnet said, holding up one claw and striking the pedantic pose of a natural lecturer. "Is proper terminology for female canine of any species." She noticed the two pony princesses staring at her. "What, you no think Bonnie Garnet went to school?" she said scornfully. "Racist."

Applejack sputtered and picked up her sword again. "Well that's NOT what it means when PONIES use it!!"

Bonnie Garnet glowered at her. "Are you misappropriating Bonnie Garnet's culture?" she growled in offense.

Applejack spluttered some more, turning red. "Oh for crying out-- and what in the Sam Hill is that thing anyway??" she pointed at Applebloom's ride with her sword, more than happy to change the
"A toaster!" Applebloom chirped. Now Applejack and Garnet stared. "I thought it'd be a good idea to make a toaster that put butter and jam on your toast for you," Applebloom went on. The two adults looked closer; they could now see that several of the canisters on the back were full of various jams, jellies and spreads, and there were racks of three or four kinds of bread. Applebloom looked down at the mechanical monstrosity she was riding. "It, uh, kinda got away from me," she admitted sheepishly.

Applejack rubbed her temples with her hooves. "Ah'm almost afraid to ask where your cousin Babs is at," she said.

"Up in the rigging with those honkin' big scissors, cutting us loose from these varmints." Alarmed, Applejack looked up. There was a loud TWANG from up above, and several howling Diamond Dogs went rocketing off into the sky. "Whoa, careful, Babs, those things are under high tension!" Applebloom hollered.

There was a sound like tearing silk and a whooshing noise. "Whoop, looks like she finished the rigging and got to the envelope..." There was a ragged cheer as the enemy airship fell away and began to sink. The Diamond Dogs began to break ranks in panic.

"My BLIMP!" Garnet yelped.

"EAT SOURDOUGH, VARMINT!!" There was a rapid fire mechanical sound, something like "Ker-CHUNGG," and a volley of burning slices of bread smeared with marmalade struck the Diamond Dog pirate queen in the chest and face. Howling, she tumbled off the quarterdeck and down into the panicking broil below.

"Darn it," Applebloom said. "It's still burning the toast..." She yanked the controls and the UberToaster clanked around to stand side-by-side with Applejack. "Come on, Sis-- let's run 'em off together!" she cackled as the bread feed loaded another dozen rounds.


"... and stay away from my coffee maker."

****

1)As could be expected of subterranean creatures, Diamond Dogs were a bit... acrophobic.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!