

The Best Night Ever Extended

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Chapter 1

"As horrible as our night was..." Applejack stated.

Rarity continued, "...being here together has made it all better."

Pinkie Pie exclaimed. "In fact, it's made it the best night ever!"

Celestia joined in the laughter of the friends, but then she frowned.

Twilight Sparkle noticed her mentor's expression, and asked nervously. "Princess, I thought you weren't angry at what happened."

"I am, but not at you, my dear Twilight Sparkle." The Princess replied reassuringly. "I heard some of what you were saying about your night. While I had hoped you all would liven up the gala, which you did, I had also intended it as a reward for all your hard work."

Rainbow Dash exclaimed. "But you knew the Gala was going to be awful! You just said so!"

Twilight tried to hush up the impetuous pegasus, but Celestia nodded. "However, I had originally expected Twilight and Spike to be the only ones coming, which is why I only sent two tickets. I should have realised that she would never have left out her new friends. I'm sorry if you felt I was ignoring you, my little pony."

"Oh, that's alright..." Twilight Sparkle blushed, both at the apology and the term of endearment.

"I still believe I owe you an apology. You've proved such a diligent student in your magic studies, I sometimes forget that you're not as well versed in court etiquette as most of your peers. As hostess, it is part of my job to welcome my guests. I know a number who only come to the Gala just so they can say they've met me in person." She rolled her eyes.

"Once I'd fully discharged my responsibilities, we could have had the talk you were clearly so eager to begin. I would have let you go enjoy yourself with your friends until then, but I also wanted you to be at my side when I

greeted every-pony. The position is a high honour, and I wanted them to see who I felt deserved it." She smiled. "Also, I must admit it felt good to have you at my side."

Twilight turned even redder at the complement. Eventually Rarity exclaimed. "Twilight, darling, remember to breath!"

"I had hoped that Luna would be there at my other side, but, she didn't feel ready to face so many people officially." Celestia's face turned sad, and she shook her head, mane sweeping behind her, clearly worried about her sister. "When your friends wished to come, I was surprised, but I certainly wasn't going to say no, after all they have done for me, and Equestria. I thought you knew what you were letting yourselves in for."

Twilight looked downcast. "Then it's my fault. I just wish I'd studied or asked about the Gala, then maybe I could have told my friends and they wouldn't have had such a disappointment."

"Aww... That's alright, sugar-cube." Applejack said. "I guess we all kinda had our own ideas about what this shindig was going to be like, rather than finding out for real."

"Well, I'm only too glad to make it up to you, though I'd also like to ask another favour, a personal one. It was also another reason I was happy your friends were coming, they may be able to help too. This may be a job that only the magic of friendship can solve."

All six ponies leaned forward slightly. The task had to be serious to require their combined talents.

The Princess looked over at the pony behind the counter. "And speaking of making it up to you... Pony Joe, could we please have a round of your finest doughnuts for everyone!"

"Yes ma'am, Princess, right away!" The unicorn stallion behind the counter set to work, horn glowing as he raised lumps of dough out of his mixing vat. He speared them with his horn, and with a practised flick, flipped the proto-doughnuts in the hot vegetable oil. Spike had dozed off, and not even the smell of fresh doughnuts could wake him, but the others at the table were only too happy to accept.

Suddenly, a figure appeared in the doorway, a dark purple filly, covered in a cloak which concealed her cutie mark though not her proportions, and with a hood that somehow seemed darker inside than it should be, and which hid her face quite effectively, though there was the barest glint of a horn.

"Hi Princess Luna!" called out Pinkie Pie, "Come and join us! We have doughnuts!"

The figure stopped dead, and her horn glowed as her hood slid back. "How did you..."

Pinkie Pie replied brightly. "I got a tickle in my ear, and a wrinkle in my muzzle, and that only happened just before we met you the last time. Oh, and when I eat carrot soup, but there's no carrots, or soup around, so it had to be you?"

Luna looked even more confused, and Twilight took pity on her. "Pinkie sense. It violates Marelin's law of temporal fungibility, but it works anyway. I find it best to just nod and move on. There are things in this world that neither science or magic can explain, and Pinkie Pie is most of them."

"Um, big sister, when you said I should meet you here..." Luna looked around nervously, and took a backwards step. "I... maybe I should go..."

"But you only just got here!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed, and bounced across to her. "If you don't like doughnuts, I'm sure Applejack has some left over apple fritters! They're apple-tastic!"

Somehow, Pinkie Pie appeared behind her, blocking off her escape route.

"Oh, little sister, come on in." Celestia said. "I think you've 'convalesced from your ordeal' long enough. I know you didn't get a proper chance to meet your saviours during our progress, but I had hoped you'd be able to at the gala. I wanted you to have a chance to meet some new ponies, and Twilight Sparkle and her friends are some of the best."

"Sure Princess, c'mon over and take a spot!" Applejack called out, quickly followed by the others in their own ways.

The purple alicorn looked shame-faced. "How can you be so... accepting? After what I did!"

"Now Luna!" Celestia's voice was gently reproofing. "I thought we'd been over this. You have nothing to be ashamed of. I said I'd forgiven you, and I'm sure these ponies never thought they'd needed to."

She spoke to the others. "This was the favour I was about to ask. I'm afraid my little sister has had a hard time adjusting. She still feels guilty over what she did as Nightmare Moon. And she feels worst about the things she did to you when she was released from the moon. She's stayed in the palace, working hard on regaining her powers, but not doing much else. I've spent whatever time I could with her, but I hoped meeting you would show her that she has nothing to be afraid of."

Celestia looked back to Luna, but her eyes grew distant, and she suddenly seemed far older than usual. She seemed to be talking to herself as much as the younger princess.

"If only I'd been able to use the Elements properly the first time. I would have freed you of Nightmare Moon myself instead of putting you to sleep in the moon. Unfortunately, I didn't have the good friends to help me that my student had. Mere power, even the power to move the sun, can't replace the spark needed to activate the full powers of the Elements of Harmony. You've been hurt so badly, and it's my fault."

The Fellowship of Harmony were not a little shocked. It wasn't everyday you got to hear the confessions of a goddess.

"Oh no, big sis, don't feel bad!" Luna stepped forward, pleading. "I don't remember my time in the moon, and you've been there for me ever since I was released... I..." She teared up, and laid her head against Celestia's, each hugging the other with one foreleg, Celestia going down on her knee to lower herself to the smaller princess's height, and getting misty eyed herself.

The long moment was broken by Pinkie Pie. "Why the long faces? You're both together now, and it's time to party!"

She started singing and dancing around. "Ohh, you shouldn't be so teary, for it's all turned out right, the doughnuts are now here, so come and have

a bite! We're happy that you're here with us, so join the party mood! No need for you to fear with us, so come and have some fooood!"

She finished her song holding the last note and standing on the table, on one hoof. She was balancing the fresh tray of doughnuts on her nose, and releasing party streamers she'd gotten from somewhere, possibly party-space.

"Whoaaa!" Unfortunately the pose, like the pony holding it, was inherently unstable. She overbalanced, and was caught by Twilight's telekinesis, while the tray was caught by Rarity's power. The doughnuts flew every which way, most scattering randomly, but somehow, two of them neatly ringed a pair of unicorn horns. Even Applejack couldn't have done better with a horse shoe.

Twilight winced as the two princesses separated, identical cross-eyed looks on their faces as they focussed on their doughnut be-ringed horns. Celestia reacted first, demonstrating all the aplomb of royalty.

"Well! Not the way I usually have my doughnuts delivered, but it has the advantage of being fast." She flicked her horn and the doughnut flew in the air again, to land neatly in her mouth. She munched on it thoughtfully, then swallowed. "Interesting glaze..." She said, deadpan. "I do believe it is pineapple!"

Luna meanwhile, had just stood there stunned, then she started to smile, then giggle, and at this last remark collapsed on the floor, rolling over and laughing helplessly. It was infectious, and spread to the rest of the group. As she started to calm down, Pinkie Pie pointed to the doughnut on her horn. "If you don't want that, could I have it? It has chocolate sprinkles!"

That just sent the younger princess into fresh paroxysms of laughter. When order and doughnuts had been restored, Luna stood with her sister and the fellowship at the table, and far more at ease. Celestia smiled at her. "It's good to hear you laugh again after so long, little sister."

"It felt good to have something to laugh about." She looked around at the assembled ponies, and took a deep breath. "I want to say I'm sorry, for everything I put you through. I tried to kill you, scare you to death, attack you with monsters, break your wills and your bodies..."

"That wasn't you, Princess, that was Nightmare Moon." Twilight replied.

"But it was! Well, a part of me, anyway. When no-one appreciated my nights, it was so easy to lash out, hurt people, _make_ them notice me, and what I did. Part of me knew it was wrong, but I didn't listen. And as I ignored that part of me, my memories as Luna faded, leaving only Nightmare Moon. I became a monster, but it was still me, and I remember everything I did."

She gazed down at the table. "There was still some part of me that knew what I was doing was wrong, was evil, but I didn't care. When you hit me with that rainbow, it was like a shower of ice water. It shocked me, cleared my mind, and in that moment, all my memories came back, and so did my conscience. Remembering what I'd done, what I wanted to do..."

"Hey now, no need to get yerself all hot and bothered again." Applejack interrupted. "Ain't none of us perfect. There was the time I tried to harvest all of Sweet Apple Acres myself, I was plumb near crazy from lack of sleep, but I was just too shootin' stubborn to accept help."

Rarity added. "I got beautiful wings from a spell Twilight used to let us go support Rainbow Dash at the Young Fliers competition, and ended up trying to upstage her. I let my pride in my appearance get the better of me, rather than supporting my friend.."

Fluttershy spoke gently. "I promised to babysit for Rarity's little sister and her friends, I thought it would be the same as taking care of my animal friends... but it wasn't. They ended up wandering into the Everfree Forest."

"I thought all my friends were being mean meanie-pants, hiding things and keeping secrets, when they were actually planning a surprise party for me!" Pinkie Pie put in her two bits worth. "I thought they didn't want to come to my parties any-more, so I know how bad it feels when you think no-one appreciates you!"

"For that matter, I thought all there was to activating the Elements of Harmony was researching and finding them. It took a group of real friends to show me I was wrong." Twilight Sparkle said. "We've all make mistakes, but I like to think we've learned from them too."

Rainbow Dash had been silent from continuous doughnut inhalation, but stopped to say. "I haven't! Uh, I mean I haven't made any mistakes, not that I haven't learned... Oh horse-feathers!"

The rest of the fellowship glared at her. and she amended. "Uh... sorry, well I may have made a couple of mistakes, yeah, I'm sure I have, sometime. Oh yeah, like I didn't believe I wouldn't be totally awesome at the Young Flier's competition, which I was!"

Twilight rolled her eyes. "You did get rather over-competitive in that contest with Applejack. And how about the way none of us appreciated how much work Rarity put into these costumes and embarrassed her with that fashion show, after she made new ones to match what we wanted." She looked down at her dress, now rather mangled. "Oh Rarity, I'm sorry, I didn't realise..."

"It is alright." Rarity replied brightly. "It's nothing a few stitches won't fix, and some fabric. I could do a magical repair job, but that would only last a few minutes. Anyway, I clearly need to adjust the set of Rainbow's cloak, it really rides too high when she's moving at full speed."

"Are you kidding?" Rainbow replied. "These threads are sweet! I've gotta admit I backed the wrong pony there. They don't slow me down one bit, and they made me look awesome! They're at least twenty percent cooler than my idea!"

Twilight tried to get things back on track. "Princess Luna, what we're saying is, you made a bad decision, but it seems you learned from it, just like we did. If you want to put it behind you, none of us blame you for what Nightmare Moon did. So we'd be honoured if you'd be our friend."

There was a general agreement around the table.

"I rather you didn't, be honoured I mean." Luna responded, then wrinkled her muzzle. "I get enough of that kind of 'friendship' from some of the court, the ones that don't think I'm delusional. Having friends, real friends would be wonderful."

"Delusional? But you're Princess Luna! You change the day to night and raise the moon!" Twilight stated.

"Not yet, though I'm working on it. I still need big sister's help to shift the moon around, though I'm doing a lot of practice on asteroids and meteor showers, like that one a month back. I'm rather pleased with how that turned out. I managed to tighten up the interval and tweak the velocities to give the brightest possible show."

"That was you?" Rainbow Dash asked. "It was so cool! Made me want to go up there and fly through 'em!"

"Having all those meteors so close together gave me some really solid data for my paper on cometary formation." Twilight stated. "From the trajectories, I confirmed that it's the remains of comet Sparklemane, rather than Skydancer Scopely, which is the one in the books."

"Well of course it was! The number of times I had to tweak that thing back when it was out-gassing to stop it hitting Equestria..." Luna replied then stopped as Twilight face-hooved.

"Right, immortal, executive control of the night sky, I could have just asked." Twilight said, then shook her head, brightening up. "No, this is good, multiple sources of verification will help with the peer review. Not that independent validation of the hypothesis isn't worthwhile in itself."

"Science stuff later, Twilight darling, Though we're all glad you let us know ahead of time." Rarity interjected. "I think it's more important that we get to know Princess Luna. It was a beautiful display, everyone stayed up to watch it."

"And we had punch and triple decker cookies which Spike made, though he fell asleep in the punch bowl." Pinkie Pie added. "It was a great party!"

Luna gave a shy smile. "I do my best. And Luna is good, if we're going to be friends. I just wish I was back up to full power."

"If you don't mind me asking, Prin... Luna, why aren't you?" asked Twilight.

"When you freed me from my nightmare, a lot of my power went with it. It's why I still look like a filly. It'll take decades, maybe a century before I grow back to what I was, though I should have my full power back much sooner."

"Ohh! You looked different?" Pinkie Pie asked. "What did you look like?"

The purple alicorn actually grinned. "Maybe it's better to show, not tell. I do have some of my old power back..."

The air around her hazed, the light from the fixtures shifting in tone to moon-light. When it changed back, the alicorn standing there had the same proportions as Celestia, wrought on a slightly smaller scale. She flared her feathered wings. "Now if I looked like this, no-one would have a problem."

"A Moonlight Shadow illusion spell!" Twilight exclaimed. "I've read about it in an ancient spell-book, but I thought you had to have direct moonlight... oh, I guess since your primary affinity is with the moon, you can use the law of similarity to substitute light reflected from you. Though you wouldn't be able to use it in direct sunlight. But that proves it! Only you could use the spell like that."

"Not surprising, I was the one who invented it!" Luna sighed, dropping the illusion. "Unfortunately, most unicorns don't have your knowledge of spell-craft. They'll recognise the illusion, but without knowing the background, that would just make things worse, especially as I can't use it during the day. So a lot of the court think I'm either a convincing faker, or just plain lunatic who's managed to fool my big sis, or even a charity case she's taken pity on."

Celestia sighed. "One of the downsides of not being as omni-potent as my press releases say. I may raise the sun, and make the big decisions, but I rely on my court and the bureaucracy to carry them out. To be fair, most of them do very good and worthwhile jobs, though I would love to see them lighten up a bit."

She smiled brightly. "One of the reasons I enjoyed the events in the ballroom, it was fun to see that pomposity punctured. Unfortunately, there are always a few pointless hangers-on, courtiers in the worse sense of the word. I can't remove them as they are related to people who I do need. Well I could, but I prefer to be a good and noble ruler rather than a tyrant."

She continued. "Of course, they're exactly the sort of person who is around the palace, and ends up meeting Luna."

Luna frowned, not looking directly at any of them. "The ones who are fawningly polite are bad enough, but there's at least a few who seem to think it should go the other way, since I've been rather scared of taking out

my royal prerogative and waving it about. Oh it's all very proper, helping the poor Princess Luna to adjust to palace life..."

She raised a doughnut with a telekinetic lift, and bit into it savagely.

"That Blueblood is the worst of them! He's come closest to having me go Nightmare Moon on his overly groomed flanks, or at least dropping a meteorite on him."

Celestia had a stern look. "Has he been bothering you? Why didn't you say something?"

Luna couldn't look her sister in the eyes. "I didn't want to make you think I couldn't cope. I don't want you to have to do any more for me. It's not like he said it to my face, but I know what he says to his cronies in private."

She turned to the group. "Another aspect of my powers, if it happens at night, and it concerns me, I know about it, or at least know that I know something, even if I don't know what it is that I know, you know? If I concentrate on it, I get more information."

"Pardon me princess, but are we talking about Prince Blueblood, a white unicorn stallion with a star cutie mark?" Rarity asked.

"Prince? He wishes!" Luna growled. "Or rather he hopes. After all, if I'm not in a fit state to care for myself, then maybe the most handsome unicorn in Equestria should handle it, and gain a status fit for one of such rarefied breeding and good taste. Oh, you must have found out what he's like. He should have been a pegasus, since he clearly thinks he's too good to walk the same ground as the rest of us." Coming from an alicorn, that was some insult.

Rarity nodded. "I noticed. Not to be crass, but he has to be the most self-absorbed..."

"Stuck-up..." Luna threw back.

"Narcissistic..."

"Posturing..."

"Supercilious..."

"Egotistical..."

"...aggravating prig of a stallion I've ever had the misfortune to meet." Rarity finished. The two fillies shared a look of sisterhood.

"Unfortunately his father is my Minister of Agriculture, and very good at his job." Celestia added. "His father asked me to bring him to court, so he could interact with his peers and learn how to comport himself in high society."

"He can compost himself as far as I'm concerned." Luna sniffed. Her earlier shyness had vanished.

"I wasn't flapping my muzzle when I said he was already considering himself royalty. I think he has some insipid idea that I'm going to fall madly in love with him, and marry him. Worse yet, he had half the court believing we're already an item. The idea that anyone could possibly resist such a handsome, well groomed, charming stallion, never crosses his mind." The sarcasm practically dripped off her.

"That's what fooled me." Rarity sighed. "He seemed to be my Prince Charming, the one I came to the Gala to find in the first place. "

"You came looking for Pince Charming, and got saddled with a prize chump instead!" Luna said. "I hope he wasn't too dreadful."

"Are you kidding?" Applejack exclaimed. "He were plumb rude to Rarity, treated her like a servant, even pushed her in front of a flying cake that would have hit him!"

Considering apple pies were considered the weapon of choice for an Applosian range war, this was roughly equivalent to using her as a shield from an assault rifle.

"He what?" Luna said, angrily. "Fine, let's see how he can dodge meteorites! Don't worry, sis, I won't actually hit him, but he needs to be taught a lesson. Let's see how dignified he can be when he's looking up nervously at the sky every five seconds!"

"No need." Rainbow Dash grinned, gesturing with a hoof. "Rarity already let him have it but good! She told him just how rotten he was, then shook herself off and splattered cake all over him. He totally freaked out and backed into the statue... Uh, sorry about the statue... and the pillars, Princess Celestia."

"You don't need to be sorry about that, Dash dear" Rarity replied. "I understand you were trying to save it. I didn't see anyone else trying to help."

"That's cuz Dash was the only one fast enough!" Applejack said. "She was there before most people had figured out anything was wrong, and that includes those two Wonderbolt characters. That guy one may have been the only one to buy one of my pies, but he didn't seem much use else-wise. You'd have thunk they'd have checked on Dash after the pillars collapsed at least."

She snorted. While she might be competitive with Dash, she cared for her, and ponies not living up to their promises grated.

"It's not like she didn't save their flanks, and the rest of their pastel hides at the Young Fliers competition, oh wait, she did! At least that high-faluting unicorn got a face-full of cake, though that ain't half enough pay-back by my reckoning. They said she could hang with them, and then they left her hanging instead, hanging out to dry more like."

Rainbow Dash exclaimed. "Hey, it wasn't like that... well, okay, it was a bit but maybe they were distracted by Fluttershy's stampede."

"I'm really sorry about that." Fluttershy replied to Dash, voice lowering. "I just so wanted to meet all the animals, I just got... a bit carried away."

"It's okay, I'm not blaming you." the pegasus said loyally. "I'm just saying that might be why they didn't check on me."

"Still don't excuse them ignoring you before then." Applejack exclaimed. "If there's one thing that gets my dander up, it's ponies who don't keep their promises!"

"I just wish someone had enjoyed my Pony Pokey song!" Pinkie Pie added, sighing. "Nobody seemed to be having fun. They were all just standing

around talking with with serious expressions. No dancing, no games, nobody enjoying themselves."

"It's alright Pinkie. They just don't know what they're missing," Twilight stated. "You throw the best parties. I didn't realise just how staid this one would be."

"I'd love to go to a party like that," said Luna wistfully. "With singing and dancing and games. I've been at far too many of the other sort lately."

"Okie-dokie-lokey! Next time I have a party in Ponyville, you're invited." Pinkie Pie exclaimed.

Twilight Sparkle was thinking out loud. "If we want everyone to act natural, we may have to hold it after dark. Then Luna can use her Moonlight Shadow to disguise herself. Uh, you may want to get the moon and night organised beforehand."

"That would be great!" Luna exclaimed. "Could I, big sis?"

"Of course. I'm glad you're all getting on so well." The white alicorn said, benevolently. "If you tell me what you want for the night sky, I can take over for that night. It's not like I haven't done all nighters before."

"Well, I want to hear about what happened at this party! Flying cakes, stampedes, pokey ponies, it sounds like I missed out!"

A full recounting didn't take long, and at the end, Luna frowned. "But that's not fair! You had so many hopes for the Gala, and you didn't get any of them! Sis, we have to do something about this!"

"What do you suggest?" Celestia asked, inwardly pleased at how well her new plan was going. Luna had been brought out of her funk, and had new friends. Her favourite student and her friends, who were shaping up into some of Celestia's best trouble-shooters, would get the rewards they well deserved.

Maybe, in another decade, Luna would be up to returning the favour, and Celestia would be able to play hooky for a day. Well, if there was one thing an immortal had plenty of, it was time.

Chapter 2

Luna looked around the Fellowship of Harmony, considering how to fulfil her impulsive, but heartfelt decision.

"Fluttershy, I think I can help you most easily. The Royal Gardens were one of my favourite places to... hide when facing all those courtiers got too much. I've spent many hours there, reading up on recent history and the sciences, modern magical theory... It's a wonderful place to study, quiet and peaceful. It's off-limits to just about everyone.

"That's also the reason the animals are so shy, the only ponies they know and trust are myself, Celestia, and Hoedown, the head gardener. And it took them weeks when I first got there before they were willing to show themselves in my presence. I guess I had some left over Nightmare-Mooniness they could sense, or something. My sister and Hoedown had to eventually introduce me, since I was spending so much time there, the animals and birds weren't getting their exercise." She looked slightly embarrassed.

Fluttershy's eyes widened. "Oh my, is that an old earth pony with a tall straw hat, and a fondness for whistling?"

"So you did meet him!" Luna smiled and nodded. "One of the few ponies to make me feel comfortable, right from the start. But then... oh yes, you mentioned he got caught in your box trap. He's about the only pony that spends more time in the gardens than me. I think he knows every creature by it's first name. If you had him around, you shouldn't have had a problem."

Fluttershy ducked her head and mumbled, "."

Luna looked puzzled. "Err, what was that?"

Fluttershy just squeaked.

Pinkie Pie bounced up and down, waving a fore-hoof in the air. "Oh, oh, I know this one! Fluttershy was only interested in finding the birds and

animals and didn't talk to the old gardener, and find out that he could help her. And now she's embarrassed for making a foalish mistake! After all, when you meet a lone named NPC, he almost always has useful information for you."

Fluttershy squeaked again and nodded, then gave the pink pony a strange look, and she wasn't the only one. Twilight asked. "What's an en-pee-cee?"

Pinky Pie looked puzzled. "I don't know, you read lots more than I do! Really Twilight, this isn't the time for word games, shouldn't we be working out how to let Fluttershy meet all the creatures in the Royal gardens right now?"

"But you... I... said..." Twilight spluttered, then gave a sigh. "Yes."

"Well it seems simple enough to me." Luna said. "I take her with me back to the gardens, and get Hoedown along. We coax the animals out, and you get to meet them."

"You can do that?" asked Fluttershy, eyes wide, shyness gone. "But I thought the Royal Gardens were only open during the Gala!"

"To every-pony maybe, but I see no reason why you couldn't visit whenever you want." Luna frowned. "It's a stupid rule anyway, no-one else ever uses them, and then then once a year we give leave to every-pony to trample around, scaring the animals..." She noticed the pink maned pegasus look away and tear up. "Sorry, Fluttershy, I didn't mean you."

"But I did! I was so desperate to meet them I chased them, I scared those poor things!" She sniffled. "I was really mean! I've had to tell an animal off for being naughty, and be stern with them, like that cockatrice, but I've never acted mean to any animal in my whole life! I don't deserve to have another chance to meet them!"

Twilight Sparkle spoke in the silence that she left, looking right at the pegasus. "Fluttershy, you also told off that dragon, and I remember exactly what you said. 'You're not a bad dragon, you just made a bad mistake.' If you can forgive a dragon, why can't you forgive yourself for a mistake? After all, as we told Pr... Luna, making mistakes doesn't mean you're bad, it just means you're a pony..."

She paused for thought. "Or a dragon, if you were a dragon to start with, maybe that phrase needs a bit more work."

Luna thought out loud. "We can't do it tonight, they'll be exhausted after all that running around, and most of them are diurnal anyway, but by tomorrow night they'll have calmed down."

"Oh, that would be wonderful!" Fluttershy's eyes were still shining, but with happiness. Then she added. "But I do have to take care of all my friends back in Ponyville too. I can't leave them alone for two nights in a row."

Luna shook her head. "I have a flying chariot and pegasus team assigned to me, though I haven't used it yet. Travelling is not a problem."

"If you're doing yer visitin' tomorrow evening, I reckon I can check in on yer critters fer you." Applejack added. "Y'know I'm pretty good with them, when I ain't half out of my head from lack of sleep, at least."

"Thank you!" Fluttershy smiled as she looked around the group, practically glowing. "Thank you so much!"

Luna felt pleased, one down, five to go. It felt good to use her power at last, and in such a good cause. If only the others were as easy... Suddenly, Luna's ears pricked up, and her horn glimmered softly. Something impinged on her senses... she hadn't arranged this, but her sister... She glanced at Celestia, who was picture of serenity, albeit serenity with a cup of tea and sugar frosting on her lips. Luna decided it wasn't important and said, "Someone else's coming here..."

"The Wonderbolts." Pinkie stated confidently. At Twilight's questioning look she added. "Rear right hoof tapping, tail twitch."

"Well two of them, anyway." Luna clarified. "Wait, I think you should hear this, Rainbow Dash especially."

"... never figured I'd have fun at the Gala!" Spitfire's voice came from a point in mid-air above the table.

"And that Dash kid was right in the middle of it. What did she think she was doing?" her partner Soarin replied. Dash's ears drooped as she heard herself mentioned like that.

"Trying to stop that statue falling over, I guess. Wouldn't catch me jumping under that kind of weight. I fly best as a pegasus, not a frisbee."

"The kid must have a a set of giant brass hooves to try a stunt like that in the first place. Not to mention she's got to have Earth pony blood to have held that thing up at all. I was kinda impressed."

"Didn't say I wasn't. Hey, it's just as well she did. If those pillars had gone over any earlier, some of those fat cats in top hats might of been squashed flat. Hey, that rhymes! What I want to know was why you didn't try to stop her. Too fast for you?" Spitfire chuckled.

"I thought you were with her! I got dragged off to talk to that Lady Pooflehoof. The only time I saw her was when she offered us that cup of something. Why she was doing it with her hind hoof I don't know."

"Me either. Then we got hauled off to the photo-shoot. That VIP section was crazy busy, and too flapping loud." Spitfire snorted. "I may love my job, but schmoozing with the sponsors is one of the worse parts of it. Most of the time I just stood there and nodded, it's not like I could actually hear most of what they were saying."

"If that goof-ball Fleetwing hadn't pulled a flexor tendon on the final manoeuvre, we'd have had a sixth pony to share the load. 'Warm-ups are for the weak', my fluffed pinion feathers! He probably did it deliberately just to get out of the whole glad-hoofing bit! Sure he was there for the first five minutes but then, he was out of the there faster than a filly with a tail-wind and fireworks strapped to her flanks!" The male Thunderbolt sounded uncharacteristically annoyed.

"Hey, I only did that once!" Spitfire sounded as if she was living up to her name. "Yeah, if I find out he was faking, he's cleaning the stables for a week! Making the beds, doing the laundry, cleaning the bathrooms, taking out the trash, the whole nine pony-lengths! Darn it, I wanted to talk to the kid about how she pulled off that Sonic Rainboom."

"Whoa? That was her?" The stallion exclaimed.

You could almost hear the female rolling her eyes. "You didn't hear me say... oh right, I'd forgotten that when your stomach starts up, your brain shuts down. I want to hear what other moves she's got. I could see what

she was trying at the Young Fliers competition, that cloud spin trick looked pretty good. Though whoever set up the clouds needs a good buck to the hindquarters, debris in the flight-path is how accidents happen!

"For that matter the whole thing was badly organised. Who lets two contestants on the field at once? I mean, what did they expect us to do, get up and leave because it had over-run? And where was the crash team? If we'd hit the ground at that speed, they could have just filled in the hole! It was only luck, and some sweet flying by Dash, that saved us from getting a terminal mud facial."

"Then there were the grass-munching skills she showed with that statue. I've never seen anyone react that fast or move so fast, and she was in a fancy dress in the middle of a crowded room! Anyone can fly a clear sky, but ground level manoeuvres, that's what separates the fillies from the mares. I wanted to get over there to help the kid, but I couldn't get through, or enough room to dust off and over. Then Princess Celestia arrived, and that stampede happened, and I lost track of what was going on."

"You're saying she may be a future Wonderbolt?" Soarin sounded surprised.

"I'm not saying she's the next Wonderbolt, but she's certainly got the skills and the nerve for it. Remember, Flamefeather may be leaving after next season, so we should start looking for new talent now. We do owe her, kid was probably feeling pretty let down. Buck that ground-magnet Fleetwing anyway! Anyway, she deserves an apology."

Dash was now grinning madly, hooves to her face. "They like my moves! Ohmygosh! They noticed me!"

Spitfire sounded thoughtful. "Of course, there's more to it than that. Remember how close I came to getting bucked out my first season for show-carting? Like that dumb firework stunt. I've got a feeling she's got some of the same..."

"Mule-headed stubbornness combined with reckless insanity and utter lack of consideration for consequences?" Soaring chuckled. "Ghost Sweeper nearly singed the _rest_ of your tail off with that speech."

"I prefer to call it, independent and adventurous spirit, creativity and a pro-active attitude!" Spitfire replied primly, then went back to her normal speech. "But yeah, no matter how good she is on her own, if she can't put it aside, learn to fly as part of the team, then she'll never make it. Which would be a bucking shame. But if she can handle the discipline and formation flying as well as she can do solo, we might have a winner."

Soarin asked. "So what say we grab some quick calories from Joe's, then fly a search pattern for her? If the Princess decides to cut up rough about the palace being wrecked, having the two of us to say she did her best to limit it couldn't hurt."

"I like the way you think, fly-boy!" Spitfire agreed. "Between talking to the massive manes, and signing autographs I didn't even get to visit the buffet."

"Trust me, you didn't miss much. Fancy filigree fluff drizzled with sauce. Just the sort of thing the refined taste-buds of the flakiest flakes of the upper crust would yearn for. Not that I got a chance to try it, I only had time to get that pie, and I was lucky to get that before we had to do the rounds."

"I wanted to visit that apple-cart, those apple fritters looked tasty. What was with that anyway? The filly running it wasn't dressed like one of the palace servants."

"Don't know. She was selling stuff off it, just like a market stall. Crazy, but by Celestia, it was worth it! Thought I saw her deliver a cake, just before it all bucked off." Soarin explained, adding. "Hey, isn't that the apple-cart parked in that chariot space?"

"Trust you to spot things when it's food on the line!" the Wonderbolt mare chuckled.

"They're right outside!" Rainbow Dash had been listening intently, and suddenly her eyes widened as she realised they were about to come in. "Ohmygosh! Please Luna, hide us or something!"

Luna glanced at her puzzled, then the glow of her horn intensified. "Joe, please act normally. Everyone else, stay still and don't talk above a whisper! I'm going to encourage them not to notice us."

The two Wonderbolts entered the café, walking right past the fellowship's table without looking at it. "Hey Joe, long time no see!"

"Yup, normally you get them delivered. Your usual orders?" The cook asked as the two pegasi went up to the counter.

Spitfire nodded. "Uh huh, lay the sugar on extra thick, we've got a long night ahead of us. Oh, yeah, have you seen a blue pegasus filly, rainbow mane and tail?"

Joe thought for a moment, then briefly glanced in the direction of the table and winked the eye out of sight of the two Wonderbolts. "Now you mention it, I did see her in here earlier. Dressed up for the gala, though her dress was wrecked. She was at the gala, had a pretty rotten time of it."

The two Wonderbolts got guilty looks, and Joe clearly decided to twist the horn a bit deeper.

"From what I caught, some people she trusted, really looked up to, let her down badly. They invited her to join them, then ignored her. What made it worse was she's not from Canterlot, and the Gala was her one shot at meeting them. Sounded like she'd been looking forward to it for months."

He flipped the doughnuts into the sugar bowl as the coffee perked. "Sounds like it got a bit more exciting than usual. Way I heard it, she mangled that expensive looking dress stopping a statue falling over or something. Seems the only time they even noticed her was when she was helping out, so that's what she did.

"Didn't work the way she'd hoped. She never even saw them. I mean, you'd have thought they'd at least have gone to check she was okay. I ask you, what kind of pony goes raises some poor filly's hopes, then stomps 'em under-hoof and leaves her twisting in the wind? They'd have to be complete jerks."

"Yeah, complete jerks." Spitfire echoed miserably.

"Okay, I think they're ready for you now."

"Huh, what?" Spitfire and her companion looked thoroughly beaten down, and didn't notice the cook glance towards the fellowship's table again, but the sudden change of pace made them look up.

"Your doughnuts and coffee." A tray with their orders sat on the counter.

"Oh, right." Spitfire's tone was subdued. She glanced at her companion, and got a nod. "Better make that order to go. I'm not hungry right now, and I figure we both have something more important to do."

"Yeah, which way did they go when she left?"

"Who said anything about her leaving?" Joe said, grinning.

The two Wonderbolts turned around, seeing only the empty café.

Luna partially dropped her illusion, at Dash's whispered request, and the pair suddenly saw her. Spitfire exclaimed. "But how... You set us up?"

"I prefer to think of it as extra service. I gave you a free side-order of perspective. To her this is far bigger than to you." came Joe's voice from behind them.

"But it was all a mistake!" Spitfire said, shaking her mane angrily. "The Gala is our biggest single fund-raiser. Do you think we enjoy being stuck in the middle of a bunch of stuffy stuffed shirts?"

"I'm not the one you should be telling." Joe replied.

Spitfire took a deep breath, and trotted over to the table. "Uh, hey there, Rainbow Dash."

Rainbow Dash knew this was it, the chance she'd been angling for the whole Gala, to make her play for a shot at the Wonderbolts. She was also terrified, for all her outward coolness. She knew, just knew that whatever came out of her mouth, it would somehow be the wrong thing, and she'd blow her best chance ever, and she couldn't even speak...

Suddenly she felt a hoof against each of hers, and she could see the others, clearly but transparently, like ghosts. From the way the two Wonderbolts were still looking at her, she was the only one. Pinkie Pie and

Princess Luna were to either side of her, their hooves against hers, and the others circled the table.

They were there for her. Her friends. They wanted this for her, she could see it in their eyes, they knew she could do it. Well, she was Rainbow Dash, the pony who never let her friends down. Suddenly, she was in the zone, feeling the way she normally only felt when travelling through the air at speeds that could only be described as far too fast.

All the panic and doubts blew away in the slipstream. 'Twilight or Luna must be using a calming spell or something', she thought. 'Thanks guys, but I can take it from here'. She 'd heard these two talk like normal ponies, about normal pony things.

Forget the fan-girl fantasies, they were real ponies. Maybe she should be one too. She knew they were impressed with her flying skills, maybe she could show them she had the other things they needed. "Hey there, Spitfire. You too, Soarin."

"Look, we're really sorry about how things turned out at the Gala." Spitfire said. "We didn't mean to leave you out of it. It's just that we've got to press hooves and do the whole publicity bit. I guess you heard."

"Sorry about that." Soarin added, then duty done, flipped the doughnut off the plate with a wing tip, and caught it in his mouth. While he sounded like he meant it, he seemed content to let Spitfire carry the conversation.

"Yeah, I guess it was pretty dumb of me to expect you guys to drop everything for me." Dash said, off-handedly. Somewhat to her own surprise, she found she meant it. She hadn't realised that being a Wonderbolt would be anything other than awesome flying. She hadn't figured on the rest of it. Listening in really had been a eye-opener.

Spitfire winced. "Still, I guess we kinda hit the ground on that pretty hard. I saw your zero-height moves out on the dance floor. They were sweet!"

"Aww... that was nothing, if you want to see some real moves I could do my Super-sonic Strut, or my Rainbow Splash." Rainbow Dash said, proudly.

"I'd like to see them some time." The Wonderbolt captain replied, smiling. "And I wish I could have been there for your Sonic Rainboom, conscious, I mean."

"I do to." Dash felt this was the moment. "Y'know, I've pretty much wanted to be a Wonderbolt since I was in junior flight camp. I have all the articles, know every-pony's name, all your manoeuvres, past tours, everything! Flying with you guys, it's pretty much everything I've ever dreamed of since I was a filly."

"You know it isn't all fun and games, don't you?" Spitfire asked. "You've got a lot of hard training and publicity stuff like this one. _Dull_ publicity stuff too, for every kid that wants a hoof-print, you've got a dreary dinner for the Loyal Order of something, where you trot out a five minute speech and then spend the rest of the night listening to over-stuffed stallions telling each other how much money they have."

"The flying is likely to be different to what you're used to, solo manoeuvres are the exception. It's a tough schedule, and you have to work as part of the team. That means sometimes sitting in the bleachers while the other squad does a move you're sure you could do better, or staying precisely in a given flight-path, even if you can see a better one, because you're team mates need to know exactly where you are. You understand?"

Rainbow nodded. She'd been thinking ever since she'd heard them in the street outside, a fact which would have surprised even her friends. Most people saw the hot-head, or the pegasus that chilled on clouds and didn't realise that when something engaged her interest, she could be as focussed as Twilight.

"I think so. I always figured I'd pull some stunts and strut my stuff here at the Gala, and you guys would let me join. Simple as that. I guess I was wrong. But I know about training, I've been training, figuring out new moves and practising them since... well, forever."

"As for teamwork and staying the course, I'm Weather Control Officer for Ponyville, and I paid my dues as an assistant weather mover for a couple of years, before that, so I know about formations and working with other pegasi... and any of my friends will tell you that I'm loyal. I _never_ leave someone hanging, and if I say I'll do something, it's done."

Rainbow Dash paused to frame her next question, she'd found out tonight that there was far more to living her dream that she'd imagined. She looked into Spitfire's eyes, no bravado, just a pony who needed a straight answer.

"When I heard you might actually think I was good enough to try out, I was so excited, but... I found out once tonight that just because you think something's gonna be awesome, doesn't make it that way. I need to know, is it worth it? The time when you get up there and show the whole of Equestria your stuff. Is it worth all the rest of it, all the dull meetings and training?"

Spitfire's eyes grew distant. "When you're boosting along, pulling a sevenfold star spiral, nothing between the you and a spin-out but your own skill and the timing of your team-mates... Oh yeah, it's worth it, a hundred times over!"

Dash sighed, eyes equally distant, fixed on a future only she could see, then smiled. "Then I want that too, and I'll do whatever I have to to get it! I know flying, as well as anyone in the sky! And what I don't know, I can learn!"

Now the sixty-four thousand bit question. "So, will I get the chance?"

"I wouldn't have asked to see what you could do if the answer was no." Spitfire replied, nodding. "I can't promise you anything right now, beyond that chance to try-out, but we'll be starting to look for new talent soon, and if you can back what you said with your wings..."

"Always." Dash couldn't believe it, she had an offer for an audition! "I told a friend once I could clear a sky of clouds in ten seconds flat. There was about 30 percent cloud cover. Ten seconds later, no clouds."

Spitfire suddenly realised something. "Hey, how did you know we were considering you? I only just said so on the way here."

"You're not the only one with a team." Rainbow grinned. She'd been serious long enough. Time for some fun. "Meet Twilight Sparkle. Scary powerful mage, and about the smartest pony I know."

Luna took her cue and dropped the illusion on Twilight. The purple unicorn blushed at the praise but nodded politely. "I was the one she was talking to

about the clouds. I timed it, ten seconds. She's also the most loyal person I know."

"Okay, unicorn magic. Some sort of invisibility spell" Spitfire had the right of it, except for the species.

Dash left out Spike, the kid was asleep, but went round the table.

"Applejack, owner of Sweet Apple Acres. I think Soarin already met her, or at least one of her pies."

"Yeah, and it was delicious! Got any more?" Soarin said, having long since demolished the pile of doughnuts on his plate.

"Wish more of those fancy folk at the Gala felt the same way. I still got plenty." The pony in the hat replied. "I weren't too happy about the way you treated Dash at the Gala, but I reckon it weren't deliberate or outta meanness, so I'd be happy to let you have another one, though I'm guessin' Pony Joe might have something to say about that."

The counter-pony replied. "Keep orderin' and I don't care what you get up to so long as it don't damage the furniture. This is normally my dead time, before the palace night shift come off duty."

Dash smirked. "Next we have Rarity, who designed these awesome outfits. Though mine looked better before the palace fell on it."

"Delighted." Rarity had cleaned and buffed up her outfit and hair magically before she reappeared.

Soarin said to Dash. "Oh, yeah, If the Princess complains about those wrecked pillars, we can back you up that you were trying to save them. It was that bozo unicorn who started wrecking the place."

"I do hope you mean that royal pain, Blueblood." Rarity asked, in a tone that was on the edge of causing icing on the leading wing edges of the Wonderbolt stallion.

"Is that what he was called?" Soarin asked, oblivious. He wiped the smeared frosting off his muzzle with a wing-tip. "What kind of guy freaks out over a little cake, anyway? I'd have been diving the other way."

Spitfire rolled her eyes. "He would too."

"That still makes him more of a gentle-pony than Blueblood. I'm glad not all stallions in Canterlot are obnoxious foals." Rarity said, now turning on her considerable charm. While Soarin was still drooling, Rainbow Dash continued the introductions.

"Fluttershy's great with animals, well, usually." She chuckled, remembering the stampede.

" h'llo." Fluttershy mumbled, and ducked her head.

"Don't let that shy routine fool ya! I've seen her tell off a rampaging red dragon!" Dash added. Pinkie Pie nudged her firmly with a hoof, and she realised the yellow pegasus wasn't enjoying the attention, so she moved swiftly on. "Next we have Pinkie Pie, the greatest party thrower and party goer in all Equestria."

"Hi!" Pinkie Pie bounced around the table to shake hooves with Spitfire. "I'm happy that you made Rainbow Dash happy, and that you're happy because everyone's now happy!"

Spitfire's eyes widened. "Weren't you that pony who was up on stage, trying to haul the party into the current century? It sounded a lot more fun than the big bland music they were pushing!"

Pinkie Pie nodded enthusiastically. "When that old lady said they didn't want to party, I thought they wanted to par-tay!" Then she sighed. "But they didn't. No games, no fun, no laughter. But if you enjoyed it, then at least I made someone happy."

"Princess Celestia should get you to do her next party." Spitfire said. "Maybe then the thing mightn't be the dullerest duty on our calendar. Last time I checked, a dance floor was for dancing. Though good luck getting any of the regulars moving at more than a slow walk. They'd probably trip over their own egos. If I ever get that dull, you can bury me, because I'll be dead."

"Ohh! Zombie ponies!" Pinkie Pie exclaimed. "What a cool party theme!"

Rainbow Dash grinned. Now for the big reveal. She glanced over at the two princesses, and surprisingly, both of them nodded.

"I've still got two more to go. The first is the lady who did all the special effects, our newest friend Luna. Princess Luna if you're going to be formal."

The named alicorn appeared. Spitfire goggled, but then shook her head. "Wow! That's a good one Dash. She really looks the part!"

"I _am_ the part!" said Luna, doing her Moonlight Shadow to appear in her full form, surrounded by a shroud of starlit sky. This was enough to even tear Soarin away from rapt contemplation of Rarity. "Mistress of the Night, Keeper of the Lunar Crescent, and all the rest. Accept no substitutes. You may now bow, peons."

She rather spoiled the imperious effect by giggling.

"But you can't be! I've seen Princess Luna at that Fall festival display and she was all quiet." Spitfire said.

"I've been ill." Luna shifted back to real form. "But I'm getting better."

Spitfire still looked a bit uncertain. "Okay, fantastic prank, Dash, next you'll be telling me that Princess Celestia's here to vouch for her."

"Why should I tell you when I can show you." Dash smirked.

Luna dropped the final part of her don't notice me field. The two pegasi's jaws didn't quite hit the table, but they made an honest effort. There was no uncertainty this time, they'd met her and no-one could fake Celestia's aura. They went down on their knees.

"My dear Spitfire and Soarin. So good to see you again." the Princess said. "Please, get up, this isn't a formal occasion. My sister and I are here unofficially. Thank you for your offer to protect Rainbow Dash from my terrible wrath..." she smiled, "... but I am already aware of the circumstances. She has nothing to fear."

"But... your Majesty! Majesties. I never expected... What are you doing in a doughnut shop, if you'll allow me to ask?" Spitfire asked, somewhat stunned.

Celestia glanced down at her plate and said with perfect timing. "Eating doughnuts."

That had Rainbow Dash pounding the table with a hoof as she laughed helplessly, and most of the others joined in to various degrees.

Spitfire glanced at Soarin, eye-brows raised, and said, "I think we've just been pranked."

Rainbow Dash had calmed down enough to say. "Sorry guys, but the looks on your faces... We're still cool, aren't we?" For the first time she started worrying that they might not take the joke well.

Spitfire relieved her worry by grinning. "Yeah, nicely played. But expect no mercy when you're part of the team. Though it would have been nice to know we had an audience during our little heart to heart."

Rainbow Dash had calmed down enough to put on a more serious expression. "Well I didn't just ask Luna to keep everyone else hidden for the sake of the prank, even though it was awesome! I want that place in the Wonderbolts more than anything, but I want it because of who I am, my own skills, not who my friends are. As long as it was just the two of you and me, that's how it was."

"I can see that." Spitfire was impressed again. She'd had several over-entitled brats before now expect to walk into a place on the team because of who their parents were. She was even more determined that if Dash could 'do the blue', she'd be top of the list to replace Flamefeather. She scooped up her doughnut and munched it down.

Soarin looked back and forth, brain clearly working better after the sugar injection.. "Six ponies, and Princess Luna... No... There have been rumours going around that six ponies from Ponyville were the ones to stop Nightmare Moon last year, and rescue Princess Luna."

Princess Celestia looked right at him. "And I would prefer it that they stay that way." She looked over at the rainbow haired pegasus, who seemed about to protest. "I'm sorry Rainbow Dash, while I'm sure you would enjoy the fame, not all of your friends would."

That caused the pegasus filly to pause. Thinking of Fluttershy's reaction just now, and her abortive fashion career she could understand where the Princess was coming from. For that matter, did she want to be known as the pony who helped vanquish Nightmare Moon, or a Wonderbolt? It was more of a thing that just happened, whereas being a Wonderbolt was what she'd worked for. The clincher though was Fluttershy. Rainbow Dash would never let down her friends. "Yeah, I can see that."

Spitfire had goggled a bit at this, but recovered herself. "Well, we've got to go. I've got a team to find, and a bed to go to. Dash, if you can get to Wonderbolt field by tomorrow afternoon, around six we'll try you out."

"I'm there!" The rainbow pegasus replied.

Spitfire turned and headed towards the door. "Looking forward to it! C'mon Soarin, we've gotta go. See you in the clouds!"

"But I haven't got my pie..." A pie did a flying saucer impression through the door, which had mysteriously opened, though the glow of Twilight's horn made it less so. "See you soon Dash! And thanks Applejack! Oh, and Miss Rarity, if you ever want a VIP tour of Wonderbolt field, you know who to come..." His litany was ended by pie reception.

Once the two had gone, Rainbow Dash squealed out loud, punching the air with a hoof. "Best night ever, for real, better than I could have ever dreamed! I get to try out as a Wonderbolt! For real! This is the most awesomely awesome thing to ever happen to me!"

She looked almost as excited as Pinkie Pie. "Thank you thank you thank you everyone! And Luna, your spells helped a lot! In fact, I couldn't have done it without knowing you were all there, supporting me. I don't know whether it was you or Twilight who cast the calming spell, but it worked!"

Twilight and Luna exchanged puzzled glances. "Calming spell?"

"You know, I was freaking... excited to be talking to them, and then you let me see everyone rooting for me and cast the calming spell. Made me cool as a cucumber... uh, not that I needed it really, but it helped."

Luna shook her head. "I partially dropped the spell for you, but I didn't cast another one. I don't even know a calming spell. Twilight?"

"It wasn't me. I know musical sleeping spells, but nothing that just calms a pony while awake." She looked over at Rarity, and Princess Celestia, who spoke.

"My dear Rainbow Dash, no-one cast any magic, unless it was one of friendship. I do believe all you needed to know was that your friends were there, and knew you could do it. They believed in you, and you believed them. That was all the magic you required."

Chapter 3

"I'm glad you're happy Dash." said Luna. "But that still leaves some ponies who got pretty badly let down."

Twilight Sparkle spoke up. "I'm alright actually. At least I've gotten to be with Princess Celestia, even if we haven't talked much about what I've learned. Out of all of us, I think Applejack's suffered the worse. I know how much it meant to her to be able to sell her apples here. She was going to replace the roof of Sweet Apple Acres barn, and get a new plough, and an operation for Granny Smith's hip."

She looked aside to Rarity, and over to Pinkie Pie. "I know you didn't find a prince, and you didn't get your party, but Applejack didn't just not make any money, she's wasted all the apples, and the ingredients she used to make all that food. She's lost money, and all because those Gala goers were too busy keeping their noses in the air to smell just how good her baking was."

"Aw Twi, it ain't that bad." Applejack interjected. "I kinda messed up, figuring this'd be more like a carnival. Pinkie Pie's parties always have food, I should have figured a fancy shmancy ball would have it's own catering. Besides, we had to replace the barn anyway after the para-sprites ate the old one."

Twilight hung her head. "I'm sorry about that. My spell was supposed to stop them eating altogether..." Suddenly she realised who was listening, eyes widening in panic. "Uh, that is, no para-sprites, just big moths, I completely did not half-wreck Ponyville by miscasting a spell..."

"Sugar-cube, I think Princess Celestia figured out what happened." Applejack said, glancing over at the white alicorn. "I know it seemed a mite convenient that she decided to cancel her visit, 'specially after she saw Pinkie Pie parade those critters past her."

Celestia nodded her head once at the farmer. "I also received a report from the Mayor. I know what really happened, and that a certain unicorn worked harder than any three others with magic and her telekinesis to fix things.

Spells on living things are particularly difficult, especially cast without preparation."

Luna winced. "I still remember the platypus. Long story, don't want to talk about it, ever!"

After a suitable moment of silence, Applejack went on. "Better the barn than the apple trees. That would have put us out of business. I've lost a few bits tonight, but it won't mean I can't buy Apple Bloom new schoolbooks, or Granny her favourite brand of tea. What really gets my dander up is that no-one even tried anything, exceptin' Soarin."

"And Blueblood, that ingrate." Rarity fumed. "I don't think he even tasted it before he spit it out. If he truly didn't like it, something I find impossible to believe, he could have held it in his mouth until we were well away and disposed of it politely in a napkin. Well at least I can pay you the four bits for them."

"I said I got ya covered on that." Applejack tossed her head back, closing off discussion.

Twilight sighed. "I know how you feel about accepting help, even though you give it freely enough, but we'd all like to find a way for you to break even at least."

"T'ain't that so much, as I gave my word, and I ain't goin' back on it." the earth pony replied. "I can still take the stuff I have left over back to Ponyville, and sell it there, some at least."

"Well I wouldn't mind trying one of them." said Luna.

"Sure thing, Luna. If'n Pony Joe says it's okay."

The unicorn gave a nod. "Matter of fact, I wouldn't mind trying one myself after all I've been hearing. If you don't mind letting the competition in on it."

Twilight's horn started glowing again, and Applejack said, "It's alright Twi, I want to go check on my cart anyhow."

Shortly, both Luna and Pony Joe had an apple fritter in front of them. Luna lifted hers with her telekinesis and sampled it, then immediately started

munching on the rest like she hadn't had three doughnuts. "Mmmm! This is really good!"

Pony Joe was holding his up in front of him the same way. "You're right there, Princess! I may specialise in doughnuts, but I can do other pastries, and this is as good as anything I ever made, maybe better."

"And ain't you both kind for saying it." said a pleased Applejack. "It's mostly the quality of the apples, but I like to think I'm pretty good at cookin' 'em up too."

Luna finished off hers, and said, "Well if you aren't wedded to taking it back with you, I'll take whatever you have left." She suddenly looked puzzled. "I don't actually have the money on me...to be honest, I haven't needed to buy anything since... I woke up. Uh, sis, how do we buy something. I used to have a sack of gold pieces in a drawer back at the summer palace in case I needed something, but I didn't think to look before we left."

"You would have needed to move most of a tower, from what I saw, that end of the palace was rubble." Celestia shook her head, and the others realised they were talking about the ruined castle in the Everfree forest. It brought home to them just who they were talking to.

"Applejack can do what Pony Joe will do, send a receipt to the palace treasurer, and he'll charge it to our personal expenses and send her the money."

"I don't expect you to buy everything, Luna." Applejack said. "I've still got pretty much everything I cooked up. That's a passel more than any pony could eat, before they go off anyhow."

"That's what stasis spells are for." Luna grinned.

"Stasis spells?" Twilight said eagerly.

Luna looked confused. "Wait, this is the future right? Flying chariots and ponies in shiny suits and messages across the length of Equestria instantly by flame-mail. You're telling me no-one remembers how to do a simple stasis spell?"

Celestia shook her head. "Simple to us, but remember, most unicorns don't have that much power. I'm sure a modern rune-set could handle it, but I never really considered it. It's been so long since I could find the time to do some spell research. A box where closing the lid completes the rune-set... Twilight, I know you scored high marks in your Modern Runes class. Maybe you and Luna could work together on this."

"I'd be honoured." Twilight said, then remembered what Luna had said earlier. "I mean I'd love to!"

"I'd like that too." Luna smiled back. "The spell books I'm studying take things for granted that we hadn't considered back when I was spell-crafting. I have a thousand years of catching up to do. If you'd be willing to help out."

"Yes! Oh yes please!" Twilight's eyes gleamed. "You must know other spells long since lost, that aren't in any grimoire. A chance to learn them study them..."

Rarity whispered to Applejack. "Goodness, I think she's going to go Pinkie Pie."

But the purple unicorn calmed herself down with an effort. "But we were talking about Applejack's goods. Applejack, just what do you have left, and what were you selling them for?"

The Earth pony thought. "let me reckon it up, forty eight caramel apples at a bit a piece, six big old apple pies at eight bits, twenty apple fritters for two bits each, and twenty four bags of apple fries at two bits, twenty four apple cobblers at four bits and forty eight bottles of my own Sweet Apple Acres fresh pressed apple juice at three bits a pop."

Twilight had a pencil and paper from somewhere and was writing it down as Applejack spoke. "I make it three hundred and fifty two bits. That's nice amount, but I'd hardly have thought it would be enough to buy a hip replacement."

"Well, I did have a whole lot more apples, and fixin's to bake 'em up, but they all went into that high falutin' cake. So that ain't gonna be much use."

Pinkie Pie spoke up, surprisingly subdued. "I'm sorry. I was the one that landed on the cake, or at least landed on the cart, and made it go flying,

which would have been fun if it was a prank, but it wasn't and I ruined your cake, and your night, and I got Rarity all covered in cake, sorry Rarity, and I'd pay you for it but all my money goes on party supplies, but I will make you a replacement cake..."

"Don't you fret none, Pinkie." Applejack shushed her. "I don't see how I could have made any money off of that cake anyhow. By that time, I was tearing mad, and just wanted them to try it and acknowledge that my cooking, and my apples, were worth something. 'Sides, you were expectin' to be caught."

Twilight examined the paper. "Actually, I'm surprised you were selling so cheaply. I came with Spike to Pony Joe's for an occasional treat while I was at the Academy, because he does really good doughnuts at a good price, but they're still more expensive than this. And as for some of the fancy cafés in the Palace Quarter... there's a reason I ate in the Academy dining hall.

"I had no choice but to eat in one a few times. One of those apple fritters would cost about fifteen bits, except it would have a fancy name, be two thirds the size and only half as nice. I think the difference was made up by a gilt edged plate, the monogrammed cloth napkin, and a lump of ice cream about the size of a strawberry. A small strawberry. Oh, and a staff that acted as if they were doing you a favour by serving you, and add another ten degrees to the tilt of the upraised muzzle because I was clearly a student."

"Fifteen bits?" Applejack exclaimed. "Hooee! That's some mighty expensive fritters."

"This is Canterlot, like Manehattan, everything's more expensive." said Twilight.

"I can pay the higher price..." Luna said.

Applejack shook her hand. "Nope, we have a deal, and I'm not gonna bump up mah prices just because I can. Three hundred bits may not be enough to buy a new plough, but it's more than enough to get our old one fixed up like new. So I've got two out of those three things you were talking about, sugar-cube. To be honest, even if I'd sold everything I had, a hip operation for Granny Smith'd cost more."

"If only there was a way for your farm to earn enough money for that too... I know you wouldn't simply accept the money, even if we could raise it." Twilight mused.

"That's right, and Granny Smith'd box mah ears even if I did." Applejack replied. "Rightly too. It'd cost at least ten times what I made here, and accepting that kinda gift... it was bad enough we had to take a loan out to fix the barn. We'll get by."

"Why not just come up to Canterlot and sell more apples?" Rainbow Dash asked. "They must get through a lot of 'em around here."

"Did look into it, but it ain't that simple. Y'see..." Applejack paused, "Or maybe you don't. Market vendors here in Canterlot need permits and such. Add travel time coming up here, and finding a good spot... It works out I barely make any more than I would in Ponyville. Besides, selling of the cart isn't where most of the day-in day-out money is made. That's generally for luxuries, and saving up against a rainy day."

Seeing they didn't understand, she explained further.

"We got about sixty acres planted with apple trees, and about twenty or so we use for other crops, mostly grain. That's about all me and Mac can buck. Granny Smith can't help out much, and I ain't going to ask Apple Bloom to take on more chores than she does. Filly needs to be in school, and have time with her friends.

"We sell wholesale to all of the places in Ponyville, and I've got contracts for to supply cafés and grocers in Hoofington and Trottingham. That accounts for most of our apple supply. We have to keep some in reserve to cover the contracts in case of accidents or spoilage, but when the contracts are filled, it's them apples we sell off of the cart, and make into other apple products. It's extra money on top of our main business."

"You don't sell any of your crop in Canterlot?" asked Twilight, puzzled.

"I'd love to, but I had to work through wholesalers. They were only offering sixteen bits on the bushel, and I sell for a minimum of twenty. Besides, with our existing contracts, we'd have to expand the farm, and we don't have the money or the pony power to manage it afterwards. Sure, the bumper crops we had this year mean I could fill a couple of big orders, but we can't count

on that keeping happening, even with the best weather control and growing seasons." She gave a nod to Rainbow Dash and Princess Celestia as she added the last bit.

There'd been a surprised whinny from Pony Joe as Applejack had stated her prices, and Twilight looked over at him. "You found that surprising?"

"Yep. They ain't passing those prices onto their customers. I don't use many apples myself, but a lot of my friends in the food business do, and they were complaining how the price had just gone up another 2 bits to 34 on the bushel. The fancy restaurants can handle it, heck they pay extra for first pick, but a lot of the regular places are taking a hit. If you have apples to spare, I know quite a few ponies who'd be interested."

"Do you have any idea how many bushels that might come to?" Twilight was frowning in thought as Joe gave some numbers. "And how many bushels per acre does the farm produce on average?" Applejack gave her own figures.

"Including getting Granny Smith's hip fixed, what kind of money would we be talking about to expand apple growing acres on the farm, by that much, Applejack?"

"Sugar-cube, there ain't no way you could raise that kinda money, we're talking twelve thousand bits easy, plus hiring an extra farm-hand. I can't go to the bank for another loan, not while I'm still paying off the barn. And how does fixing up Granny Smith fit in with expanding the farm?"

Twilight had a pen scribbling on the notepad, and had conjured an abacus that floated in the air beside her, clicking away merrily. "If my calculations are correct... yes, this could work! If she had a new hip, she could do some of the light jobs around the farm, letting you and Big Macintosh do more heavy work. That is unless she doesn't want to."

"Sure she does. I know for a fact it rails at her that she can't help out more." Applejack's eyes widened. "Maybe we could get along with part-time hires in that case... just for when the big things like apple-bucking season come around."

Then she looked crest-fallen. "But without the money, it's all just hooey."

"Darling, you don't need to go to the bank, not for all of it. I can loan you six thousand, at least." Rarity spoke up. "Hoity Toity and Sapphire Shores pay well for my work. I may have to have reduce my spa sessions to once every other week, but I can manage. And before you say anything, it's an investment, not a gift. We're both business ponies, I'm sure we can arrange something, maybe a corporation so there can be other investors..."

"I have almost a thousand saved up." Twilight said. "I haven't needed anything much past food money this last year, what with living in the library, and I wanted to replace my telescope with the new Decetrig Multi-Parallax 3000. But this is a better use for it."

"I can match that." Rainbow Dash added. "My Weather Control job is a pretty sweet deal. I built my own house, and I don't have any expensive hobbies. Give me an open sky and flying room and that's all really I need!"

Fluttershy hung her head. "I'm afraid I spend most of my money on healing sick animals, but I have some friends who could help with the digging if you were to give them any windfall apples, one's you can't sell. If that was alright with you, I mean..."

Rarity nodded. "And with two thirds of the money already pledged, I'm sure I can interest some other business ponies in Ponyville. After all, we're betting on the Apple family's ability to work hard and grow apples. A pretty safe bet."

"Ohhh! I want to help too, but I don't have..." Suddenly Pinkie Pie's eyes widened as a thought struck her, and she giggled. "Dash, I think we need to plan..."

Applejack looked around the table, tears in her eyes. "You'd all do that for me?"

"In a heartbeat!" "Of course!" "Sure would!"

Luna had watched this, and glanced over at her sister. "I can't help out with money, much as I'd like to. The Royal family doesn't get involved in business, for very good reasons. But I'm sure we could grant you the 'By Royal Appointment.' to help smooth the way, if you can provide more of your baked goods for the two of us. I can also find out if the Palace is being over-charged by their supplier."

"By Royal Appointment?" Rarity gasped. "Oh Applejack, that would be fantastic. Do you know how rare that is?"

Applejack sniffled, and wiped a foreleg across her eyes. "I can guess from the way you acted. Right, then we'll do this! It'll be a lot of hard work, but like you said, hard work and growing apples is what me and mah kin are best at."

Dash and Pinkie had been talking quietly, and giggling to themselves the whole time, and finally came up for air.

"We have a way to help you out, and Rarity too, and pull a prank on a great big meany-horn, all at the same time." Pinkie Pie exclaimed.

"Best prank ever, you mean!" called out Dash. "We're thinking of calling it, 'How'd you like them apples!' It's... well better to show you!"

They backed up from the table, turned to face each other, and Dash ran a hoof over her mane. "Scene 1, The Throne room. Enter stage left, a unicorn who's ego is far too big for his horn, which is small and inoffensive, unlike him."

Then Pinkie spoke. "My dear Blueblood, thank you for coming."

There was surprise around the table, as Pinkie was doing an almost perfect impression of Princess Celestia. Even her posture had somehow changed, and her frizzy mane was somehow more floaty.

"My not-so-humble pleasure, Princess." Dash's response was more a caricature of a posh unicorn accent. "Do you wish me to help raise the sun? For I need only to stand under it and look in a mirror, and the inflation of my already massive ego will lift it into the sky."

That had most of the table giggling, including Luna. "Yes... That's him."

"No, I have a far more vital task for you, one that only you can do. Your father is Minister of Agriculture, and if you are to ever hold high office yourself, you need to get some experience, 'in the field', so to speak." Pink-Celestia replied. "The palace and Canterlot, will be getting many of it's apples from a farm in Ponyville, Sweet Apple Acres. Your job will be to go

there, in person, and see to it that the expansion goes through without a hitch, and that those apples are produced."

"Now hold on an apple-bucking minute!" exclaimed Applejack. "You're gonna send that posing pony to my farm to stick his horn in everything, and tell me what to do?"

"I must agree." Rarity added. "I fail to see the prank, unless it is a rather mean one on Applejack."

"Aww... Let us finish guys!" Dash exclaimed, then went back to imitating Blueblood, badly. "But Princess, that would mean leaving Canterlot, my massive collection of grooming equipment, my full length mirror, oh, and Princess Luna. Poor dear will be totally lost without my help. You really should consider her future..."

Luna's horn was sparking at that.

"There is an excellent spa in Ponyville, and think how impressed all your friends... well, the other courtiers anyway, will be when you inform them you are on a special mission, by my direct request. Luna too will be so pleased to see you travelling so far away... to accomplish your mission."

That calmed the moon princess down as she chuckled, "Well, you're half right."

Blue-Dash was visibly swelling with pride as Pink-Celestia ladled on the flattery. "A spa you say? Very well, I shall do it! I shall go to this 'farm' and see to it that Sweet Apple Acres provides you with only the finest apples, or I'll know the reason why!"

Dash looked away to the audience. "Scene two. Sweet Apple Acres." Looking back, she went back into character as Blueblood. "You must be this Applejack I was told to see. You seem familiar, though I can't see how could ever have met a common farming pony. I am Prince Blueblood, handsomest unicorn in all of Canterlot, neigh, Equestria. While I know the mere sight of my immaculate grooming and toned muscles must make you wish to worship me, we have matters of business to discuss first.

Pinkie had somehow acquired Applejack's hat, and tied her mane back in a straight pony-tail like the other earth pony's. Once again her impersonation

of Applejack's voice was so perfect, she had ponies looking back and forth between her and the original.

"Yep, I got a letter from Princess Celestia right here, saying she was sending you to help out. So get those fancy duds off, and come on out to the fields. We've got acres of apple trees to plant, and I'm guessing those muscles must be good for something other than showing off."

"Work? Like a common Earth pony?" Blue-Dash tossed her head, overacting dreadfully, "I will forgive your impertinence this once, but my report to the Princess will not be good if it happens again. You are mistaken, I am here to oversee the work. Now have someone fetch my bags."

"It is you who are mistaken, young Skywalker, about a great many things." Pinky Pie replied, making her voice deep and creaky, pulling the hat forward to shade her face, and everyone, even the two princesses felt a chill go down their spines.

"Uh... Pinkie, you know the guy's called Blueblood, right?" Dash looked confused. "Skywalker sounds more like a pegasus name than anything."

Pinkie looked confused for a minute. "I just thought it sounded right somehow..."

Dash shook her head. "Pinkie, you are so random!"

The pink pony bounced back. "Okey-dokie-lokey, I was Applejack, and you'd just asked me to fetch your bags."

As Apple-Pie, she pulled the hat back into place and said. "That ain't what the Princess said in her letter to me, sugar-cube. Reckon you should take a look at it yerself before you get up on yer high horse." She held out a napkin in her teeth, then dropped it, but Dash was looking at it as if it was still there. Pinkie Pie went back to Princess Celestia's voice.

"Dear Blueblood, if you are reading this message, you have met Miss Applejack, the proprietor of Sweet Apple Acres. I believe you may have met her before, at the Gala..."

"Aagh! That's it, you were selling that fatty carnival food!" Blue-Dash waved a hoof at her frantically.

"Please don't interrupt my letter, and be politer to Miss Applejack. As I was saying. She is highly knowledgeable about both the growing and cooking of apples, so please do not argue with her. I trust her implicitly. I believe the best possible place for you to begin your field training is in her fields. You will follow her requests as if I was giving them, and assist her to the best of your ability.

"While I'm sure you aren't familiar with manual work, but I trust Applejack and her family to teach you. I believe that experience broadens the mind. It will undoubtedly help you when you ultimately begin work in your father's department to understand the work you're directing. Of course, I would not ask you to do something you truly did not want to..."

Blue-Dash raised a hoof and pulled it down in a 'Yes!' gesture.

"... and if you wish to return to Canterlot, I'm sure no-one will say anything invidious about the fact that you abandoned the mission you were sent on five minutes after you started, being humiliated in front of your peers and made a laughing stock of the entire court..."

"I get it, I get it!" Blue-Dash said, wincing.

"Then the next thing you can get is your own bags, and then we can get to work, in the fields." Apple-pie responded.

"In the fields? with the dirt? My mane, my coat, my pedicure... Nooo!" Blue-Dash went to her knees, head up in a classic pose of despair, then got up, grinning at the audience. "You get the basic idea. He eats what he's given, sleeps where he's told, and won't have much time for a spa treatment, or much point, since he'll be going straight back to the fields.

"And when he's worked a few weeks helping Applejack, she offers him a chance to help out a friend for an afternoon in a job where he only has to stand around and look pretty. He'll jump at the chance! I'm sure Rarity will need a male ponyquin for something..."

"Blueblood? A field hand? Wouldn't it be kinder just to give him a blindfold and last stick of rubarb and pie him right away?" Luna asked, trying and failing to hold in her snickering.

"Genius!" Rarity was giggling away. "Absolute genius! Especially the chance to use him as a ponyquin. Being a clothes-horse is probably all he's good for."

Dash finished off. "Applejack gets her extra help, Blueblood gets some lessons in hard work and that looking pretty and sneering at people doesn't always work."

"Hmm..." Celestia started, and the levity around the table stopped. She was trying to avoid laughing herself, they had picked a perfect solution to several problems, more than they knew. But time to add her own finishing touches. "You seem very certain that I will go along with this prank. It does seem a bit excessive, even if Blueblood has a number of problems with manners and his actions around other ponies."

"I... we just sort of..." Dash looked abashed.

"Very well, I will assist in this, but I would ask both you Applejack and Rarity too, to not mistreat him, simply because of the way he acted. Very few ponies are utterly irredeemable. I would remind you Applejack that even the smelliest fertiliser can have a seed under it that can grow into a fine plant, if you are willing to nurture it. And Rarity, I'm sure you have found gems of great worth inside rocks that looked worthless."

"I won't go easy on him, but I ain't going to expect anything more of him than I would another green farm-hand." Applejack said, retrieving her hat from Pinkie Pie. "I'll do my best to see that he learns some better manners, though it might take a couple of hard lessons first."

Rarity added her own comment. "If Applejack teaches him manners, I can teach him etiquette. I'm sure every one has good in them somewhere. Even though in this case, I may have to arrange an extended mining expedition. "

That got a few chuckles.

Celestia nodded, pleased with the outcome. As Rainbow Dash had said, Blueblood should learn some valuable lessons from these ponies, and it would help Applejack with her expansion project. What they probably didn't realize was that if Blueblood could be taught to be a better pony, then maybe Rarity might find a Prince Charming after all.

Chapter 4

Luna looked around the table. "You don't know just how good it's been to be here, talking to you all. It's inspired me...I look at all of you, what you've accomplished, what you're going to accomplish, and I'm more determined than ever to get back up to full moon-raising status. It's past time I made that Princess tag on the front of my name mean something."

She looked over to Celestia. "Big sis, do you think I'll be ready to solo by the winter solstice?"

"If you work diligently with Twilight Sparkle, I believe so. I feel the power inside you, what you still lack is the finesse to fully exploit it. Twilight has considerable power of her own, and in learning to control it, she's worked hard on training methods that I think would benefit you."

"I'll help in any way I can, of course!" Twilight quickly added.

Celestia smiled. "If you want an example of her work, cast your vision back about three months, to two days after the new moon."

Luna's eyes fixed on something only she could see. After a few seconds she winced. "Ow! Why didn't I feel a magical spike like that, especially from somewhere as near as Ponyville... Oh, I remember, I put too much effort in to helping with the lunar loft that night, and went to bed with a horn-ache and a sleeping draught. Let's see..."

She blinked a couple of times, and then frowned.

"An Ursa Minor!" She shook her head, "What is that idiot unicorn doing, not you Twilight, that... Trixie? Using physical attacks against a magical beast? Give her credit for having the horn to try and do something, but she clearly doesn't have a clue! Aha... The main event... a Wind Whistler spell, looks like you did do the research. Mind affecting spells are far more likely to succeed..."

"Magical beasts have good reflex and fortitude saves, but poor will saves." Pinkie whispered to Dash, who just looked at her confused. You could tell

she was about to comment on Pinkie's randomness, but Luna started speaking again.

"Why the water tower... oh, now that's elegant, I see what big sis means about finesse, and with the milking done blind too... No way! You did not just loft a couple of hundred tons of creature and haul it all the way back to a cave halfway across the Everfree Forest!"

She stopped replaying the vision, and looked right at Twilight Sparkle instead. "Are you sure you're not hiding a pair of wings under that cloak? I wouldn't have believed any-pony short of an alicorn could shift that much mass, and so gently."

Twilight was blushing furiously under the praise. "But I didn't mention any specifics in my report. How did Princess Celestia know... oh, gee, the Mayor again?"

Celestia smiled. "She did indeed. When I felt that magical pulse, it woke me out of a sound sleep. I could feel it was your magical signature, but as Luna has taken back that part of her portfolio, I couldn't watch for myself. The mayor's flame mail told me what had happened. I thought about sending you a letter, but I wanted to wait until I had time to say directly how proud I was of you that night. There was also another reason..."

Luna looked up to see the white alicorn's gaze on her. "You thought I might get jealous?" her first words were angry, but then, she stopped herself and said more slowly. "Maybe... maybe you're right. I do so want you to be proud of me. Not being able to take on my full duties, then having some-pony else get praised..."

"You might have thought you were being replaced." Celestia's eyes held only sympathy. "The two of you have a lot in common."

"I don't like admitting I could be so petty." Luna sighed. "Especially as I agree. That was something to be proud of."

"The fact that you're willing to admit something like that does make me proud, very proud indeed. You are my sister, and no matter who else I care for, and nothing can change how I feel about you. Despite what I had to do to protect Equestria, and protect you from falling deeper into Nightmare Moon, I never stopped loving you. No-pony can replace you in my heart."

There was something unguarded about the Sun Princess, as if she'd dropped some wall or barrier that was normally always there. "I asked you that day, in front of these same ponies, if you would accept my forgiveness. I wanted to wait until you'd... healed before I asked for your forgiveness, for what I did to you."

Luna snagged another doughnut and head lowered appeared to be inspecting it carefully. At least that was at first glance, but the distant look in her eyes told a different story. "You did what you had to do, to stop Nightmare Moon from doing anything irreversible..."

She looked up, and her gaze was directly on her sister. "Of course I forgive you! You saved me from permanently turning into some-pony I did not want to be. If my foalishness had actually killed some-pony.. Learning a thousand years of missed history and magic is a small thing compared to that."

The Fellowship of Harmony to a pony felt an unaccountable lump in their throats as the two Princesses touched muzzles again. This was the second time that night they'd seen a pony peek out from under the diadem Celestia wore. Twilight Sparkle in particular was starting to realise just what it must mean to be the Princess and not the pony, for a thousand years without a break.

When they separated, Luna relaxed a bit. She finally took a bite of her contemplation doughnut, and said nothing, for her mouth was full. Then she chewed, and swallowed, and spoke. "Speaking of learning, we're back to Twilight Sparkle."

She gazed over at the purple unicorn. "My pegasus chariot team are going to be busy. And so are you. It doesn't seem quite fair to ask you to put in all that time, and get so little in return."

"That doesn't matter, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity for me. To work with you..."

"Still, I can't help but remember that this was supposed to be your time with my sister. I've rather messed it up, we all have. I was hoping you'd accept something to make it up to you." Luna looked up at Celestia. "Our next one was at the quarter moon..."

Celestia actually looked surprised. "Luna, you can't mean..."

"I know how limited your free time is. And I get to see you every day. I'm sure I can survive missing one of our private sessions to let Twilight finally get the chance she's been wanting to talk to you. She'll probably have be horn-lifting Ursa Majors for training about then."

Twilight started. "Luna, you don't need..."

Luna gave a shake of her head, whipping her mane back and forth. "Yes I do. I need to prove, to myself most of all that I won't be jealous, that I can share my sisters attention with others without feeling threatened. And if there's one other pony I owe more than I can ever repay, it's the one who pulled the Elements of Harmony together, found the way to bring me back. Please, accept it in the spirit that it's offered."

"I'm humbled." Twilight bowed her head. "Of course, if Princess Celestia is willing, then I'd love to!"

The Princess in question nodded, beaming, which wasn't surprising, considering her portfolio. She was both surprised and pleased with the way her sister was going above and beyond anything she'd expected so soon. Even she hadn't expected the magic of friendship to have this big an effect. "As you wish, my dearest Luna."

"Actually, there was something else I wanted to ask about... the reason why I want to get up to bringing up the moon on my own by winter solstice." Luna had turned almost as shy as she'd started out.

"I'd like to have a party, an official re-introduction, not just the court but every-pony You have the summer solstice celebration, and I was thinking, for the longest night of the year, I can put on a really special night sky. I want to make it clear I'm back and doing my part."

Pinkie Pie perked up at the suggestion of the party, then remembering what the Gala had been like calmed down.

Celestia gave an indulgent chuckle. "Why do I suspect you have more than one motive?"

"Because you know me too well." Luna grinned back. "I was sort of thinking that rather than a big formal ball, we make it more of a festival, a carnival, all through the night. Games and music you can dance to, and dancing to the music you can dance to. All the things the Gala isn't."

Celestia raised her eyebrows. "A Canterlot party that's about enjoying yourself rather than showing off how rich and powerful you are? It might be worth trying, just for the shock value. Of course, as this is a once in a lifetime event, I'm sure all my regular guests at the Gala will be eager to be there..."

Both of them were failing to hide identical smirks. Luna continued.

"And they'll welcome, as long as they're willing to accept, my party, my rules! Such as a dance floor is for dancing, not standing around talking. Of course, if the Gala's anything to go by, the staff at the palace seem to have forgotten a party's supposed to be fun. We're going to need outside help, some-pony who's an expert in parties, and fun... But where in Equestria would we find some-pony?"

"Oh, oh, oh, I know!" Pinkie Pie was threatening to take out the lighting with her bouncing. "Me! Me! For I am the best at parties, everybody will agree! If it's in winter, you could have snowball fights and hot chestnuts and mulled apple-juice and ice skating outside, and fancy dancing and funny dancing and funky dancing and karaoke inside..."

"Alright, alright..." Luna waved a hoof. "You invited me to one of your parties in Ponyville. If I enjoy it, and I'm sure you will, you've got the job."

"Yay! This is the greatest night ever!" Pinkie Pie was so excited, she looked like she was about to explode... twice. "I won't fail you Princess! This party will be the party to end all parties, except that it won't because that would be a bad thing, instead it will inspire parties... forever!"

"That sounds about right." Luna giggled. "But that still leaves me with another problem. I don't have a thing to wear..."

Rarity was not stupid, and could see what was coming, though she was holding her breath through sheer force of will.

"Would you have any ideas, Rarity?" Luna asked.

"yes!" she squeaked, then managed to repeat herself in a more normal voice. "Yes! I'm sure I can make you a dress befitting your status, and the dignity of the occasion."

"Well, it's got to be something I can dance in as well." Luna added. "And it would be two dresses, since you'd be making one for my big sister as well."

"She would?" Celestia asked, amused.

"Well I hope so." Luna replied. "I know there's a whole 'official appearance' thing going on with the Royal regalia, but I'd love to see you in something different. When's the last time you got yourself a new dress anyway?"

"It has been a number of centuries." The sun princess admitted with a sigh. "They seem to keep falling to pieces within a few decades, no matter how they're cared for. It's probably why I no longer have an official dressmaker. It's rather expected of me to appear like this for official functions. I suppose I have got rather set in my ways."

"Then this is the perfect chance for you to do something different, have some fun with it! We can put it down to my party, my rules again." Luna said excitedly.

Celestia thought about it. "Very well, but there will need to be three dresses. One for you, one for me, and one for Sunny Day Skies."

"You're not going to stay as yourself?" Luna asked, then looked around the table.

"It's alright. I know Pony Joe is trustworthy, I'm sure if we asked them to, they'll all keep the secret." Celestia reassured her.

Pinkie Pie nodded furiously. "Absolutely! Not keeping some-pony's secrets is the fastest way to lose a friendship..."

"Forever!" the rest of the fellowship finished in chorus, and burst out in giggles.

At the princesses odd looks, Twilight added. "It's a long story, involving Fluttershy, Rarity, a modelling contract, and apple-cider. Uh... so what is the secret we're going to be keeping?"

Celestia appeared to shrink, and in a few seconds a regular pegasus pony stood in her place. She was sky blue, though she retained her unique mane and tail striping but in brighter colours, tied in a pony-tail. A simpler version of the solar cutie-mark shone on her flank. She still spoke in Celestia's voice.

"My alter-ego. Although we can know what happens under the sun, or moon in my little sister's case, there are still times we wanted to go among our subjects incognito, to find out things in person. Though I admit, I haven't done it for... over two hundred years, has it really been that long? My goodness, I have been slacking off." There was a humourous tone to her last sentence.

"I have Selene." Luna changed slightly, and was a unicorn pony with her hair tied up in a bun and large wire rimmed glasses.

Twilight was looking hard. "But those aren't illusions, they're real shape changes! Self-transformation is the hardest of all magic to do! Um...if you don't mind me asking Luna, if you could do something this hard, why would you need the Moonlight Shadow, and why the cloak when you came here?"

"I can only do this easily because I'm not my full size, so the changes are minimal. Of course, if I was my full size, I'd be my full power and holding this form would be simple. As for the cloak, big sis asked me to come as myself." Luna shifted back to normal.

"I guess that makes sense... and Selene is another name for the moon, but Sunny Day Skies... unless..." She wrinkled her muzzle. "It's a Sunny disguise, isn't it?"

"Well done." Sunny said approvingly. "My own small pun. I usually just go by the name Sunny Skies."

"Begging your pardon princess, but won't every-pony recognise your voice?" Applejack asked.

"They would, if it was the one I used." She gave a cough, and continued, in a faster and more casual sounding voice, tapping out a beat with a hoof. "Sunny Skies, pleased to meet-cha. I think my wings are my best feature. They send my through the skies just like a meteor, and if you try to race me then I'm gonna beet-cha!"

The ponies all goggled at the sight of Princess Celestia rapping.

She continued in her normal voice. "I don't believe any-pony would assume I'm Princess Celestia in disguise. Sometimes being obvious and unusual is the best kind of invisible. Which is what I'll need to be for most of this celebration. I'll be there officially at the start, but if I stay, it will attract attention away from Luna."

Luna added. "Not to mention you can have more fun this way!"

"There is that." Sunny agreed. "So, do you think you can do the job?"

"Oh my, yes..." Rarity was clearly about two seconds from a Rainbow Dash style geek-out. "I wish I had some of my portfolio, so you could see what you might like..."

She looked around the room. "Maybe I can do something about that. Pardon me, Mr Joe, but could I borrow the other side of the café for a few minutes? I promise nothing will be damaged."

"Go ahead." Pony Joe grinned. "You folks have been pretty entertaining so far."

"Twilight? Do you remember the cues for the fashion show? And would you be a dear and put up some curtains?" Rarity was already trotting around, touching her horn to the various costumes. Tears magically sealed up, dirt and cake vanished, bows re-tied themselves.

"I think so." Twilight's horn glowed, and a set of stage curtains in a frame manifested, blocking off the other side of the café beyond the door. "But you're the one who guides the music and effects, I just got behind what you were doing and pushed."

"And it worked marvellously..." The white unicorn looked down at her fore-hooves. "If only I had my other slipper. My ensemble won't look right without it."

"Here you go!" Pinkie Pie dropped a dustpan full of bits of crystal on the table in front of her.

"But... where did you get this?" Rarity exclaimed.

"From the Palace steps of course!" Pinkie replied. "I was worried some-pony might hurt themselves, and I thought you might need it, and you did, so here it is."

Rainbow Dash gave her a look. "And do you always carry a dustpan and brush to royal balls?"

"So far, yes, because I've only been to this one, and I brought a dustpan and brush to it."

"Why?" Rainbow asked, perplexed.

"In case I needed to sweep something up silly, why else?" Pinkie shook her head as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. Rainbow looked about to continue, then shrugged her wings and settled down to watch Rarity. She levitated some glasses out of an inside pocket, and they now perched on her muzzle.

Her horn glowed gently, and the pieces down to the motes of crystal dust floated up in mid air in front of her, like a miniature snow-storm frozen in mid-billow. A small diamond hovered at the centre of it, drawn from another inside pocket. The glow of her horn increased, and larger parts started floating together, smaller motes swirling around them, trying to find places to fit.

The cluster of glass fragments shrunk in on itself, accreting around the diamond which seemed to melt into the glass. As pieces fit together, lines of light formed along the cracks, until the completed shoe was covered in a delicate tracery of light. It brightened until the entire shoe was glowing, and then faded, leaving an intact shoe that floated gently down to the table, landing with a gentle 'ting'.

Rarity raised her bare fore-hoof and placed it in the shoe. It fit perfectly, and stayed on when she put her hoof back on the floor. "Much better!"

Twilight was as impressed as every-pony else. "Gosh, I'm not sure even I could duplicate that, certainly not without a lot of work. I can see you used the law of sympathy to guide it back into the shape it had, but why the diamond?"

"Something I found out by accident, darling. I use magic to fuse the gems to a dress, much more secure than gluing or weaving. So one day I found that I could fuse a gem all the way, infuse it rather, and the fabric or whatever would take on the qualities of the gem. Adding a diamond makes it very tough and resistant to damage. The only reason I could shatter it was because I made it in the first place."

"Wow!" Twilight sounded fascinated, and Luna did too. "I want to see if I can learn that spell, work out the arithmancy and dynamics behind it. If you don't mind sharing. Think of the applications!"

"I want in on that!" Luna added eagerly. "If it isn't a trade secret, as Twilight said."

"Of course not." Rarity replied breezily. "My dresses are the finest because of my creative skills, not because of some technical trickery, as you'll soon see."

In a moment, all the fellowship was shuffled behind the curtains, and the show began. Rarity stepped out, apparently without her dress, and lit up her horn. Music started to play, the chords from 'Also Spake Zathura' and visible illusions wove themselves around the watchers, creating effects that really shouldn't have fitted in a diner.

Two minutes of awesome later, the six members of the fellowship stood framed by the fully open curtains, with Rarity in the middle, horn still glowing.

"Marvellous!" said Celestia. "Bravo!"

Luna shook her head. "You had me at the repaired shoe, but big sis is right. That was amazing! Looks like Applejack's farm isn't the only place that's going to get a 'By Royal Appointment' on their letter-head."

"Oh thank you!" Rarity exclaimed, looking about ready to faint. She steadied herself and asked. "So, is there anything you particularly wanted?"

Luna mused. "I did like Twilight's but Dash's was really great too... Actually all of them, but an astronomical theme would be good."

Twilight's horn glowed again, and the stage setting vanished. "I suggest you just give Rarity a general idea and some measurements , then let her get on with it. We tried to micro-manage the designs originally, and they turned out to be disasters. These are all her. She's the fashion genius."

"Then I'll do that." Luna nodded, and looked over at Celestia, who'd shifted back to normal. "What do you think?"

The princess of the sun smiled back at her sister. "I think I'm going to have a new dress very shortly. By all means, oh, this is going to be such fun!"

Pinkie Pie looked around the happy faces of her friends. "Fun is my middle name, well actually it's Diane, but if it wasn't, it would be fun. And it looks like we've had that, and we're all going to have much more fun now that Luna's our friend too!"

"Why do I feel a song bearing down on us?" Twilight asked, rhetorically.

"Because while it started out pretty badly, we really have had the best night ever!" Pinkie exclaimed as music rose up around them.

She started singing, and the others joined in on the chorus.

"At the Gala, when we got there,

We had such sparkling hopes,

For what we'd do and see there at the Gala!"

"At the Gala!" they all sang.

Pinkie Pie continued.

"When we tried to, realise them,

They had us on the ropes,

All our wishes fell to pieces,

Right there at the Gala."

"All our dreams they crashed and burned,
Right there at the Gala!
At the Gala!"

"But then after, when we got here,
our night it didn't end,
We found the worst night's better,
When you share it with your friends,
As we shared tales of disaster, right after the Gala!"

"Though our dreams and our hopes,
Had gotten pretty mangled,
Talking through them with our friends,
Made things seem less tangled."

"With some doughnuts!" Pinkie Pie added.

Rarity took up the song. "I had hoped for, a Prince Charming, instead I got a chump. "

Applejack went next. "My appletastic treats they just weren't selling."

Rainbow Dash continued. "I was hanging, with my idols, but it seemed like I'd got dumped."

Pinkie Pie finished. "And if there was a party, no-body was telling!"

"This was what we'd waited for,
To have the best night ever.
But it wasn't working out,
It didn't seem so clever.
At the Gala!"

"But then Princess, Celestia,
came and joined the party,

Told us that, our disaster,
Came out right there in the end,
We'd livened up the Gala,
Although we'd wrecked her parlour,
But now she needed our help talking to a new friend!"

"Then came a pony, in a cloak,
It was the Princess Luna,
Got to help her with a problem,
Should have happened sooner!
Hail Luna!" That got the Princess giggling.

"When we put our heads together,
And with Princess Luna's help,
Fluttershy will meet her critters, Applejack's pies they will sell,
Rainbow Dash will get her try out with the Wonderbolts as well,
Twilight Sparkle, Rarity too,
Both will say it worked out quite well!

"This is we'd hoped for, at the Gala,
At the Gala!"

Twilight took over,
"And we've got more, than we'd hoped for,
When we started out this night,
I will work on Luna's magic,

and we'll bring new things to light,

Granny Smith gets her new hip, Blueblood learns to be more polite,

"This is now the best night EVER!" They chorused.

"After the Gala, we must go;
We're ready now, we're all aglow.
Each of now we have something,

to work on for the future,

Working together as a team,

Unstoppable, we're all agleam,"

Fluttershy sang up. "On to the gardens, meet new friends!"

Applejack was next. "Sweet Apple Acres, plant new orchards!"

Rarity sang elegantly. "For the Princesses, make new dresses!"

Rainbow Dash rocked her line. "Prove I can do all a Wonderbolt can!"

"To meet!" "To grow!" "To craft!" "To show!" "Party!" "Research!"

"After the Gala,
Out of the Gala
We've now had the BEST NIGHT EVER...
At the Gala!"

Then they had more doughnuts