

# Windfall

By Warren Hutch



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# Chapter 1

Caramel's voice sounded from deep in the closet by the door, his mellow tan hindquarters the only thing visible as he rooted about, his brown tail lashing in mild agitation. "Sweetheart, do you know where I put my umbrella?"

Pinkie Pie's chipper voice called out over a faint clattering from the direction of the kitchen. "You left it hanging on the coat pegs by the back door."

The earth pony stallion backed out of the closet and trotted across the empty tile floor of Sugarcube Corner and disappeared through a swinging door marked "Employees Only". A couple of moments later his plaintive call came from the store room. "Aw, now where did I leave my rain slicker? It was just here yesterday!"

Pinkie's voice in the kitchen chirped in reply. "On the rack in the bathroom, remember? From when Snails brought Gummy over from Froggy Bottom Bog for his weekly bath!"

"Oh right, how could I forget?" Came the stallion's mildly pained reply as he cantered out of the back room shaking his head, an umbrella hanging by it's hook from his withers. He made his way around one of the side counters and up the stairs.

Pinkie replied with a giggle over the sound of pots and bowls being moved around. "The same way you always forget things silly. It's like it's your special talent or something. I'd certainly never forget wrestling a thirty two hoof long alligator all the way up the back steps and into the bathtub, especially since we do it every week. That's some impressive forgetting right there." There was a dull thud of a heavy bag striking a tabletop. "Ooh! You know what? I bet that's why you only have three horseshoes as a cutie mark instead of four."

Caramel let out a sigh as he came trotting down the stairs, a shiny green rain slicker draped over his back along with the umbrella. "I remember

Gummy's bath time, sweetheart." He quietly suppressed a shudder while casting about at the bottom of the stairs. "Now I don't remember where I left my galoshes."

Pinkie's voice took on an apologetic tone. "You left them on the back porch. They're probably just full to the brim with water right now, which totally defeats the whole point of galoshes, doesn't it? Why don't you wear mine? They're in the front closet."

The tan stallion walked back to the closet and craned his neck inside, coming back out with a quartet of boots in his teeth made of almost florescent magenta rubber.

He set them down and cocked his head dubiously as he looked at them. "Uh... I dunno, sweetheart... I don't think they... uh... fit me."

Another giggle came from the kitchen. "Just loosen the straps, gumdrop. They'll stretch."

The stallion pursed his lips and let out a sigh of imminent defeat. "But... but they're... pink."

At this, the door to the kitchen swung open and a slightly pouting, cotton candy colored face dusted with sugar and flour poked out and fixed him with a pair of limpid blue eyes that narrowed indignantly. "Hey. What's wrong with pink?"

Caramel hung his head with a soft chuckle and trotted over to his fiancees side, nuzzling her gently behind the ear, which caused the tiny gem studded horseshoes on her engagement earring to twinkle in the lights. "Nothing at all, sugar. It just doesn't look as good on me as it does on a certain mare I know."

Pinkie Pie gave a little hop, and turned her head so she was nose to nose with the tan stallion. "Ooh! You know I love guessing games! Is it Twilight Sparkle? She's got that super neat pink stripe in her mane and tail."

Caramel's face fell for a moment as his train of thought derailed, but with an ease born of hard practice he switched tracks. He gave her a weary smile and a peck on the nose and then walked back to the galoshes,

settling down to loosen the straps and push his hooves into them. "NoOo. I'll give you a hint, sweetheart. She's the only pony I'd be willing to go out in this downpour for, especially wearing a set of bright pink booties."

She tapped her chin with a hoof as she turned back toward the kitchen. "Hmmmm. Fluttershy?"

Caramel breathed out another sigh as he got back to his feet. "Close... but no."

Now fully, if slightly ridiculously, girded against the lashing rain that pattered against the shop's windows outside, he followed her as she made her way to the center island where a large mixing bowl, a bag of flour, and a flour sifter waited. On one corner was a white cardboard pastry box wrapped in pink cling wrap and neatly tied off with string.

Pinkie picked up the flour in her fore hooves and dumped a measure of it into the sifter as Caramel took hold of the box's strings in his teeth and craned his neck to place it on his shoulders, then shifted the cape of the rain slicker so it was better protected.

When he turned back to face her, he gave her a sly grin. "I'll give you one more hint, sugar. She's the all over pinkest, sweetest, most beautiful mare this side of Equestria."

Her blue eyes crossed slightly in what passed for pensiveness for her. "Berry Punch?"

The tan stallion's face settled into a befuddled expression that was all too common for him. "Uh... no. She's more purple."

"Cheerilee?"

"She's what I'd call... uh... mauve, I guess. And, um... still no."

"Diamond Tiara?"

"What? No way. Well, okay, she's pink, but she's definitely not who I'm talking about."

"Princess Celestia?"

The tan stallion furrowed his brows with the usual sinking feeling that the conversation was about to buck him off. "Princess Celestia isn't pink."

"I know, right? But try telling that to Hasb..." She stopped and gave a little hop. "Ooh! Is it Lotus?" Her face took on a puzzled expression. "Or wait, Aloe? I can never remember which twin is the pink one."

Caramel blinked several times before he shook his head. "Now that you mention it, neither can I. Of course, I don't ever go to the spa except to pick up that mane conditioner you like."

Pinkie set the flour down on the counter cocked an eyebrow at him. "What were we trying to figure out here?"

Her fiance puffed out his cheeks and let out a heavy sigh. "I... I forget..."

She let out a giggle punctuated by a snort and shook her head. "You're adorable! Promise me you won't forget the way back from Sweet Apple Acres."

The tan stallion rolled his eyes. "I won't! Geez, I only worked there for like five years."

Pinkie nodded in satisfaction. "Good. When you get back, I'll have fresh bread right out of the oven to go with some hot rutabaga soup." She gave him a wink. "And there's some other ways I can help you get warmed up too."

Caramel's knees buckled a little as he flushed a bright red across his cheeks.

He shook his head and assumed a look of exaggerated resolve. "Well! With that kind of reward waiting for me, I'd better set out on my mission! Dare the dark and the rain and the wind to deliver one box of pfeffer... paffer... uh, peppernoogie... Um..."

The steely glint in his eye kind of went out of focus as he turned to the busily baking mare of his fancy. "What are these things called again?"

She giggled. "Pfeffernusse. They're my Mama's favorite type of cookie. So I thought they'd be good for a Mama to be." Pinkie replied matter-of-factly. "Although MY Mama might like them because they kind of look like little rocks but you can eat 'em."

Pinkie pursed her lips and gave him a solemn look. "Rocks were always kind of important to my family."

She resumed her breezy tone with a flick of her frizzy magenta mane. "I changed the recipe a little and put in oodles of pistachios because last time I went to visit Fluttershy she said she had this totally intense craving for pistachios, which is something I can work with. I mean more than the pickles or the pimentos although I suppose I could have done some kind of savory bread with olives in it and that would have been okay but savory foods and me are kind of like dragons and bicycles."

Caramel could only blink at her. "Dragons and..."

She continued without missing a beat. "Nothing to do with one another. Although if you gave Spike a tricycle I bet he'd be as cute as all get out. And we could race! I wonder if there's a place where you can rent tricycles in Canterlot." She turned and looked at Caramel as if expecting an answer.

He felt a mild tic in his left eye. Finally, his hard won instincts kicked in and he leapt for the last trailing thread of the conversation he could reach. "Okay. Pafeffermoose. Got it. On my way."

She smiled at him as she turned, pausing before she wrapped her mouth around the handle of the sifter. "Hurry back. Tell Mackie and the girls I said hi!"

With that, she lifted the metal canister over the mixing bowl and began sifting its contents into it. Caramel nodded and turned to go, pausing at the door before trotting back to her side. He sidled up to her with a smile and leaned in to plant a kiss on her cheek. "Whoops. Almost forgot to do this."

The sides of her mouth curled up into a smile around the handle of the sifter as she gave him a sidelong glance with a flutter of her eyelashes.



Suddenly, her blue eyes went wide as a violent shudder shook her along the length of her body from nose to tail, lifting her hooves off the floor in a staccato cadence and sending a mushroom cloud of flour out of the sifter and into the air over the two ponies' heads.

When his fiancée's shaking just as abruptly stopped, Caramel let out a strained cough and blinked the powder out of his eyes. Pinkie's face and forelock were completely white, and an expression of shock and incredulity played across her features as the sifter dropped out of her mouth and into the bowl with a clank, throwing up a softer puff of flour.

Her voice came low and soft, causing eddies in the cloud of ingredients that enveloped them. "A... a doozy!" She turned and grabbed Caramel by his cheeks with both hooves, pulling his gaze to hers. "A DOOZY!"

The stallion stuttered out a reply as the violent shaking overtook her again. "A-a-a Wh-wh-what?"

His head kept bobbing up and down as she released it and clomped her hooves back on the floorboards, her ears perked and her nose raised as if she were following a scent on the air. The rattling of her hooves stopped as she went still again, more flour billowing in the air around her.

Just as the tan stallion got his head to stop nodding, she turned to him and locked eyes. "Sweet Apple Acres! It's at... Fluttershy!"

A huge, gasp escaped her as she leapt bodily into the air, each hoof spinning in a different direction. She pivoted in mid leap and rocketed toward the back door, sending it open with a crash as she hurtled through it. She paused a moment and leapt into Caramel's forgotten galoshes, sending gouts of water in all directions as her hooves drove down into them with a splat, and then tore off into the rainy night.

Caramel stared out the door after her with his jaw hanging loose, listening as the rapid, squishy patter of her hooves receded. He shook his head, sending another burst of flour into the air, turned and grasped the hook of his umbrella in his teeth, and charged out after her, calling her name. "Pfinkie!"

A moment later he came back, sheepishly closed the door and locked it,



and then took off running again, the umbrella wildly thrashing over his head as he picked up his bright pink clad hooves.

# Chapter 2

Rarity's employees at the Carousel Boutique had just finished drawing the blinds and hanging the "Closed" sign in the window when they heard the gentle tapping of their boss' hooves on the polished floor to draw their attention.

A brisk smile crossed her alabaster face as her red rimmed glasses settled onto her nose. "Well done, darlings. Now that you've finished I'd like to take a few moments to discuss all the orders for the GGG as well as give you the overview for this year's Fall collection."

She turned and summoned a cork board festooned with drawings and fabric swatches from the back room with the glittering magic from her horn. "I'll be returning to Canterlot tomorrow to oversee the work at The Bijou personally, so you'll be on your own until I return for the Summer Sun Celebration."

At this her two assistants, Snips the apprentice tailor and Thimble the seamstress, exchanged a concerned glance. Rarity usually preferred to keep a tight rein on the Gala dresses her boutique produced.

She let out a small sigh. "I do so wish I could stay a bit longer in Ponyville, but that's how it is, I suppose." She caught herself and gave them a warm smile. "Not that I don't trust you darlings to do an excellent job while I'm away. I have absolute faith in the both of you."

Her employees both returned her smile with a grateful nod, beaming discreetly at the compliment. A wistful look crossed Rarity's porcelain toned face as she resumed her speech. "No, it's just I'd hoped to be here for..."

She shook aside her reverie and drew herself up, assuming a businesslike expression as she turned to the board and focused a spot of glittering magic from the tip of her horn on one of the drawings, causing it to light up slightly. "Well, enough woolgathering, as it were. Lets get down to it, shall we? The overall theme I'm going to be exploring with the fall collection is..."

She cut off abruptly as the front door to the boutique slammed open. All three unicorns turned as one to see a vibrant pink pony frantically jogging in place in oversized galoshes, each hoof fall sending a burst of rainwater out the top of each boot and onto the growing puddle of muddy water on the meticulously cleaned floor.

Her face was matted and streaked with pallid white, and her mane hung straight in heavy, dripping sheets, framing a pair of wildly glazed blue eyes. She stopped dancing in place and planted her hooves, suddenly overtaken by a vibrating shudder that sent a cloud of water droplets into the air around her, splashing onto an organza ball gown that stood in an alcove next to her.

Rarity's hoof went to her mouth with a gasp of shock, but the crazed mare in the door abruptly stopped shaking and started rapidly jogging in place again, letting loose a barrage of rapid fire speech in a rising crescendo.

"RarityfluttermacsweetappleacresitshappeningnownownowitsadoublesuperduperdodecaDOOZYwhatarewehangingaroundheretoforgottagocomeon!"

Her frantic prancing swiveled her away from the three dumbfounded unicorns and just as suddenly as she'd appeared she accelerated back out the door, splitting the puddle she'd made into a V shaped wave splashing more muddy water on the delicate dresses to either side of the entry.

Rarity's employee's heads swiveled to face her as she stood boggling, mouthing the torrent of words to herself with her ears laid back in concentration. She blinked, then her eyes went wide as well. "Fluttershy? Now? Is something wrong? Your mane's never like that unless something is wrong!"

The white unicorn's horn sparked to life and wrenched her glasses off, tossing them carelessly aside as she bolted for the door, rushing pell mell into the downpour. "Pinkie, wait for meee!"

Snips floated his employer's spectacles from where his magic had caught them in midair and folded them carefully before slipping them into a small hidden pocket behind the lapel of his vest, and then turned toward the door, willing it shut with a flick of his horn.

Thimble gave him a sidelong look. "Could you make sense out of any of that?"

The chubby, blue-green unicorn stallion sauntered over to the mess by the door, giving it a quick glance over before he turned and headed for the back room. He gave the seamstress a genteel smile. "I've got some educated guesses, Miss Thimble, but only because I've lived here all my life and am acquainted with Miz Rarity's friends. I'm going to get on the horn to the girls up at the Bijou. If what I think is happening is happening, then the grape vine needs to start shaking, as it were. If you'll be so kind as to see to the stock up front, I'll be back in a moment with a mop."

With a short bow to the older mare, he glided out of the room as Thimble tentatively stepped forward to examine the mud splattered organza gowns.

She leapt back with a shriek as the door slammed open, narrowly missing her flank and revealing the waterlogged form of a tan stallion draped in a dark green rain slicker with muddy, bright magenta galoshes squeaking on his hooves.

He spat out the handle of his umbrella, allowing the canopy to rest on his sodden head. "Did a bright pink mare just pass by?"

The seamstress pointed a shaking hoof past him into the night and rain shrouded town square. "She-she went thataway..."

He nodded to her and gripped the umbrella handle in his teeth again. "Thankfth!"

With that, he turned and galloped away, the umbrella flipping inside out with a pop as he trailed it behind him.

Thimble numbly nudged the door closed with her horn. She shook her head to clear it as she turned her attention to the gowns again.

Another slam, another shriek, this time accompanied by a prodigious leap backward on the beige unicorn mare's part that sent her crashing into a rack of sun dresses.

The tan stallion in the pink boots was back, panting with his teeth clenched

on the inverted umbrella, an earnest but glazed look on his face. "Fthorry about fthartling you there!" With an apologetic little half bow, he turned and galloped away again.

Thimble climbed shakily to her hooves and closed the door, and then began to shove ponikins and display cases against it with her magic.

# Chapter 3

A full throated argument was in strident swing in the muddy courtyard of Sweet Apple Acres main compound as the apple trees lashed and rustled in the wind and rain on the farm's rolling hills. The Apple family's latest farm dog Naomi skittered back and forth across the front porch of the farmhouse, barking frantically and wagging her tail in unalloyed canine excitement, largely ignored by the assembly of equines.

On one side stood a mud splattered white earth pony mare draped in an orange rain poncho marked with the crest of Equestrian Emergency Services, water rolling down her sodden nurse's cap and pink mane as she glared at a furious female zebra clad in a dripping dark cloak, gold rings adorning her neck and ankles as she hiked her bristling, black and white tail in agitation.

Off to the side of the argument's ground zero, two earth pony sisters stood watching with a mixture of dismay, annoyance, and worry on their faces. Both mares were bundled up in raincoats and galoshes, shiny with water and flecked with mud from running.

The orange elder sister stood hitched up to a shiny little surrey with some fringe on the top, her waterlogged old cowpony hat flopped down in her eyes, with a long blonde ponytail trailing beneath that lay flattened to her neck and dripping down her muscular shoulders.

The younger sister was a leggy, light yellow filly just on the cusp between adolescence and marehood, with an apple red mane tied back out of her eyes by a pink bandanna. Her flanks bore a cutie mark depicting a hammer superimposed over the face of a half apple.

A sneer crossed the striped equine's dark muzzle. "To take a mare in labor out in the wind and rain, I think this pony nurse has gone soggy in the brain."

The white pony scowled back at her, grinding her hooves in the muddy ground. "Miss Fluttershy needs a real doctor looking after her, not a witch

doctor!"

At this the red headed filly stamped a hoof. "Hay! That ain't very nice thang t' say at all, Nurse Redheart!"

The black and white striped mare's eyes narrowed dangerously as she advanced on the Ponyville nurse. "Your thoughtless words you had best revoke, or I'll make you regret that you even spoke"

Applejack shifted nervously in her harness. "Now just hang on there, Zecora. Lets don't all go off half cocked now. If we can just calm down and talk this thru in a reasonable type fashion..."

She was cut off as Pinkie Pie skidded to a stop beside them, throwing a wave of mud ahead of her that splattered on the blonde pony and the nurse. After a brief moment of blinking her wide blue eyes at the assembled mares, she started vibrating in place like a pastel pink, mud dipped, four legged jackhammer. "Applej-j-jack is F-f-fluttershy okay?"

The farm mare hung her head and brought a hoof to her brow with a splat. "Oh good day in th' mornin'... I knew it was only a matter o' time."

She looked up at the shimmying, bouncing pink mare, ignoring the mud dripping down her own forehead onto her freckled cheek. "Fluttershy's just gone into labor, Pinkie. I went n' got Nurse Redheart, but then SOMEPONY" She emphasized her words with a glare directed at her younger sister. "figured it'd be a good idea t' run get Zecora when I distinctly told her t' stay put n' mind her sister n' law."

The younger mare set her jaw and pushed out her lower lip in a classic little sister's "you're not the boss of me" expression. "It IS a good idea. Zecora knows all kinds o' herbal remedies and suchlike."

At this Nurse Redheart cut in, her glare still fixed on the zebra. "Which is all very nice if you want to brew tea. You'll excuse me if I prefer modern medical technology for delivering a foal."

The zebra braced her back legs, standing on the tips of her hooves as she snarled at her adversary. "The mother's in no danger, nor the foal in her womb. Why take her from home and put her in a sterile white room?"



The white pony lashed her pink tail. "Exactly! It's sterile, not a filthy backwoods farmhouse..."

Applejack looked sharply at the nurse from under her drooping hat. "Whoa now, just what the hay are you sayin' there, Redheart?"

The nurse ignored her and glared at the zebra's scowling face. "And if something DOES go wrong we can deal with it right away before things turn grave. Now get out of my face and go back to your cave!" She paused, blinking in the dim light coming from the nearby front porch before scowling to herself through gritted teeth. "Oh by Celestia's sun dappled rump, now you've got ME doing it..."

Zecora snorted and surged forward, her forehead pressing up against Nurse Redheart's as they locked flaring eyes. "I DON'T live in a cave, I live in a hut. I am THIS close to kicking your skinny white butt!"

The medical pony ground her teeth and pushed back just as hard. "Bring it on, candy striper!"

The torrential rain seemed to intensify as both mares started pushing and shoving back and forth and shouting in a raucous mix of Poneise and Zebraic, with Apple Bloom tugging at her zebra friend's tail to try to pull her back as Applejack struggled to work her way free of the surrey's harness and intervene before it escalated further. Pinkie Pie continued to bounce and jitter in place like a dismayed pink wind up toy. Naomi the dog leapt off the porch and started running in circles around the whole scene, yapping and jumping and apparently having the grandest time a hyperactive canine could imagine.

It was at the height of the tumult that Rarity staggered into the farm's courtyard, her once pristine coat slicked down to her skin and splattered with several varieties of mud, her soaked, bedraggled mane and tail bearing a payload of twigs and leaves indicating she'd taken some tumbles through a couple hedges in her headlong flight. By the look of the lily pad speared on her horn, she may have fallen into a pond as well.

A few hoof steps on her heels, a raggedly panting Caramel gamely tried to keep pace with her, attempting in vain to keep the upturned umbrella

clenched in his teeth over her already drenched head.

The disheveled unicorn came to a tottering stop next to the shimmying form of Pinkie, barely keeping on her hooves as she heaved and gasped to catch her breath, while the tan stallion who'd been following her dithered between sheltering her or his erstwhile fiancee.

Rarity's violet eyes widened as she took in the scene before her, and she began to scream, as much to the world around her as to any one pony, her normally mannered voice cracking in the throes of hysterics as she danced from hoof to hoof. "What is going ON!? What's happened to Fluttershy!? I'm WET! And HYSTERICAL! And everypony's yelling and butting heads and NOTHING MAKES SENSE!"

Applejack sat heavily down in the mud with a shuddering sigh, half out of her harness and rocking in place with her hooves over her eyes, a worsening headache pounding in her skull like the rain on her hat. Meanwhile, Apple Bloom was struggling to interpose herself between Zecora and Redheart's shoving match.

Unable to choose between the two pathetic mares on either side of him, Caramel tossed the umbrella away in despair and slouched despondently between his vibrating, shimmering fiancée to his right and the wailing, mud drenched unicorn on his left. Naomi broke out of her circular track and rushed to confront and loudly denounce the discarded umbrella, focused her full barking fury on it as if it were the most villainous thing in Equestria.

A piercing whistle echoed across the barnyard, bringing everything to a sudden, startled stop. Naomi instantly deflated and slunk away under the porch, looking abject and guilty in a way that only dogs can manage.

All eyes turned to behold the impossibly wizened form of Granny Smith standing there framed in the golden glow of the doorway looking at them all. Cold steel gleamed in her eyes while the wind played at her wispy white mane and fluttered the heavy shawl around her bony shoulders. The aged green mare lowered her hoof from her lips and set it down with only the slightest tremor on the planks of the farmhouse porch.

She screwed her wrinkled muzzle into a scowl and spoke with a voice that carried undertones of implacable command beneath the raspy dryness.

"If'n you younguns is done raisin' a ruckus, there's a sweet filly in here fixin' to give birth t' one o' my great grandfoals. Is any o' this commotion helpin HER even one little bit?"

To a mare the younger ponies all turned to face her and hung their heads, fidgeting uncomfortably under her relentless gaze as she glared at them.

# Chapter 4

Before any of the chastised mares could respond, the Apple family matriarch looked up toward Sweet Apple Acres' front gate with a grin spreading across her wrinkled face as a cheery voice sounded over the muddy courtyard. "Another Apple about to drop on our heads, eh Granny?"

All eyes turned to see a stout mare draped in a heavy canvas cloak and broad brimmed hat pick her way across the churned up mud of the courtyard, bulging saddle bags hanging from her sides. When she stepped into the light she revealed a broad, olive green face with a bluff, open smile.

Granny Smith held up a hoof in welcome. "Just the gal I was a-waitin' fer. Howdy, Cabbage Leaf. Y'got my note, I reckon."

The sturdy mare nodded. "That I did, Granny. Sorry if the weather slowed me up a little gettin' here."

Nurse Redheart blinked in recognition and stammered. "C-cabbage Leaf, the... the midwife?"

The new arrival nodded again. "Right a roonie."

She squinted her eyes and peered at the flustered nurse from under the floppy brim of her hat. "You're one of the Heart sisters, aren't you? I heard tell you all went into medicine." She beamed at the younger mare. "Does my old heart proud to see fillies I delivered make good like that. Feels like I'm makin' a difference."

The Apple family matriarch nodded in satisfaction and turned toward the door, gesturing at it with a hoof. "Well, we got one more t' add t'yer tally, if'n you'd kindly step this way, she's been in labor fer 'bout a half hour now."

Cabbage Leaf smiled and set her jaw. "Gotcha. Bathrooms back and to the left, right? I go wash up and get to work."

With that, she clomped up the steps, slipped off her muddy boots, and went

inside.

Granny Smith turned back to the zebra, stallion, and assembly of mares huddled in the rain. She snapped a hoof at Redheart and Zecora. "You, and you, go git washed up too. You'll be helpin' Cabbie out with Miss Fluttershy. Step lively now."

The zebra nodded, and started in toward the house, pausing and turning to look back at Nurse Redheart. "I am sorry to say I let my collar get hot, that I said harsh words, and that you and I fought. It is better if we work together, and both bring all of our skills to bear, for our friend and her foal are our primary care."

Nurse Redheart fidgeted and took a glance over her shoulder in the direction of Ponyville. "Yes, you're probably right. B-but... proper... proper procedures in this case..."

Granny Smith set her jaw and gazed sternly at the younger mare. "Proper procedures is what I say they is as long as your hooves are on Apple family land, missy. Either play on th' team or git the hay off our property."

The white furred mare nodded in acquiescence and fell into step behind Zecora. When they passed into the house she came up beside the zebra herbalist and leaned in, whispering with a contrite expression on her face. They stopped, and traded hoofshakes that turned into a brief hug, and then continued back toward the first floor bathroom.

The wizened mare turned to her granddaughters, focusing on the eldest, still partially tangled in the harness of the surrey. "AJ, put that contraption back in the shed then go inside and git cleaned up. Yer in charge fer the duration."

She turned to the younger sister and bobbed her head toward the bedraggled trio of Rarity, Caramel, and Pinkie Pie. "Apple Bloom, take them poor gals upstairs and get 'em settled in a warm bath 'fore they catch their death o' cold."

Without another word the Apple sisters hurried to comply. Applejack struggled back into her harness and fought the not-so-shiny-now surrey into position to roll it back into the shed. Caramel stepped aside while

Apple Bloom threw a foreleg over Rarity's shoulders and clamped her teeth onto Pinkie's tail, dragging the bouncing, jittering earth pony behind as she led the shivering unicorn toward the porch.

Granny Smith nodded in satisfaction, and then turned and cracked a toothless smile at the slightly befuddled looking tan stallion who now stood in the deserted courtyard in his mud clotted pink boots, the wind whipping his rain slicker as a dejected, broken umbrella flapped in the mud behind him. She beckoned to him with her hoof. "Now as fer you, young feller. You look like you could use some coffee and pie."

A smile blossomed across Caramel's face as he stepped up onto the porch, pausing as he pulled the slightly rumpled box forth from under the cape of his rain slicker. He beamed as it dangled by it's string from his teeth. "Thanks, ma'am. Pinkie and I brought pifflenoodle too!"

The old grey mare chuckled as she went inside. "Well that's right nice o' ya, sonny. Leave yer gal's galoshes out on th' porch so y' don't track mud all over."

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Fluttershy let out a small, strangled mew as another contraction coursed through her. She lay sprawled on an old quilt atop their bed, her wings hanging limply at her rounded sides as she let out a succession of ragged, panting breaths.

Seated on the floor beside the butter colored pegasus, her mountain of a husband Big Macintosh looked gravely down at his shivering little wife and gently stroked her back with a broad hoof. His low, gentle voice hung in the air against the backdrop of rain pattering against the shuttered windows. "Keep breathin', little wing, nice n' steady now. Just like they taught us in Lamarez class."

Her faint voice replied plaintively. "Oh... I'm sorry, b-big bunny. I... it's okay. R-really. That... that last one wasn't really that bad."

The huge red earth pony pursed his lips and furrowed his brow. He'd been married to the soft spoken pegasus for long enough to know when she was trying her best to downplay how bad things were. Big Macintosh was strong

enough to buck oak trees in half, but he couldn't do anything to ease his beloved Fluttershy's suffering at that moment. Nothing except stand firm at her side, offering her his quiet support.

Both ponies looked up as the door to their bedroom softly opened to reveal a stocky green mare with a white streaked brown mane and tail and a head of cabbage for a cutie mark. She grinned at them cheerfully as she set a pair of saddlebags down beside her. "Hey there! So everypony here who's havin' a foal please raise your hoof."

Fluttershy furtively peeked out from behind her straggling pink mane, biting her lip as she gingerly raised one of her hooves a little. "Um...I suppose that could be...um...me...I guess... If... if that's okay with you..." She was cut off with a squeak as another contraction hit. Big Macintosh nuzzled her neck as she gritted her teeth and curled her hooves into the old quilt beneath her.

He looked back up at the stout midwife as she came into the room. "You're Cabbage Leaf, right? Granny said you were comin'. I remember you from back when Apple Bloom was born."

The stocky mare chuckled as she settled down beside him. "I was here when your momma had your other sister, and I was here when she had you too, although I'd be pretty darn impressed if you remembered that." She gave him a sidelong grin and nudged him in the side. "You're a whole lot bigger than when I first met ya. Still just as cute, tho." With a wink at the husband she turned her attention to the wife.

Cabbage Leaf ran a hoof down Fluttershy's side and leaned in to speak softly to her. "Now just you relax, honey. I've been pickin' Apples for years now and I ain't dropped one yet. I'm gonna check you over, then lets see about gettin' you up and movin' around a little."

At the sound of shuffling hoof falls at the door, she turned and beckoned to Zecora and Nurse Redheart, who waited expectantly outside. "Come on in ladies, and let's get down to business."



# Chapter 5

A flourish of warm brass echoed over the pristine towers of Canterlot, as the sun descended below the dark layer of clouds that currently obscured the valley and distant Ponyville from the lofty mountain capitol city. An answering call of silvery horns sounded as a bright crescent began its ascent on the opposite horizon.

In an oak paneled lecture hall at Canterlot University, Twilight Sparkle's vivacious voice rang out as she levitated a stick of chalk and drew complicated sigils and runic equations on the broad expanse of green slate. "... and so, by process of elimination, we can determine that the magical field tastes like grape-ade." With that, she emphatically underlined a string of symbols and rounded on her audience, beaming with satisfaction. "Does anypony have any questions?"

Her smile tightened a bit at the corners as she beheld a largely empty hall, with a scattering of undergrad unicorns, half of whom were struggling mightily to appear politely awake while the other half made no such pretense and either slumped forward, their drool pooling on the thick pillow of their open text books, or sprawled back in their seats with their horns pointing toward the ceiling. Twilight's felt a twinge of embarrassment that she'd allowed another lecture to drag on for too long.

The lavender unicorn mare sighed and telekinetically straightened the frilly cravat around her neck as her shoulders slumped a little. "All right, that's all for today. Next week, Professor Presto will be back from that symposium and will be lecturing on Transformational Field theory, so make sure you've read up to chapter five of Dazzlefizz's Dissertations on Dweomers and section twelve of the Codex Regia Alicornaeum. Oh, and don't forget to bring an old sock with you for the lab session."

She turned away and floated the chalk back to its storage tray as the sounds of quiet words exchanged and hoof steps and benches being skidded rustled behind her.

The quiet murmur of the classroom was shattered by the sound of a pair of

clopping hooves and a loud, melodic cheering filled the room. "YAAY! BRAVO! BRAVISSIMO! MOLTO BENE, PROFESSORA! WHOO!" Several of the dozing undergrads were jolted awake, as the lavender unicorn's head whipped around in surprise.

Twilight squinted and peered at a pale figure perched toward the back of the lecture hall, a slender young unicorn mare with a two tone powder violet and pink mane framing a porcelain colored face with wide green eyes. It was a face the lavender unicorn recognized at once, shared as it was by one of her oldest and dearest friends, although this variation on the theme substituted a guileless freshness for her older sister's pristine sophistication.

The violet maned mare cocked her head and twitched an ear. "Sweetie Belle? You're not in this class." This gave her pause, and she raised an eyebrow. "In fact, now that I think about it, you don't even go to school here."

The young filly got to her hooves, stumbling a bit as she cleared the benches, and came bouncing down the aisle toward the front, an open smile on her primrose white face. She wore a light gold silk shawl draped across her shoulders with an edge decorated in black and white sequins arranged to resemble musical notation, which offset her gold bell and musical note cutie mark.

She came to a stop in front of Twilight's lectern. "Yeah! No! I honestly had no idea at all what you were even talking about, Miss Twilight, but I could tell you were excited about it and giving it your all. Kind of like I feel when I do the "Aria de Regia Luna" in C minor. Even if the audience doesn't speak Neightalian, they still stomp and cheer when I finish."

Twilight chuckled and a slight blush came to her cheeks as she smiled down from the stage at the filly. "Well, thank you, Sweetie. You never fail to live up to your name." She lifted a sheaf of papers with her magic and tapped them on the lectern to straighten them up. "Now what can I do for you tonight?"

Sweetie's brow furrowed in thought for a moment, then she brightened again and replied. "They got a call at the Bijou from the Carousel Boutique a little while ago. Snips told Miss Bangle that Rarity ran out of the shop with

Pinkie yelling something about one of Pinkie's doozys and Sweet Apple Acres and Miss Bangle came up to my room and told me about it and said Snips thought that Rarity would probably want me to come here and tell you about it."

Twilight levitated a briefcase from a nearby table and prepared to lower the sheaf of squared off papers into it as the wheels spun rapidly in her head. "Hmmm. A doozy, huh? At Sweet... Apple... Acres..."

Her eyes grew wide as her pupils shrank to pinpricks, and the papers exploded in a cascading, fluttering cloud. "WHAT!?"

She leapt down off the stage and gripped the startled and confused younger mare by her shoulders. "Sweetie, don't you understand? Fluttershy's foal! She's having her foal! Right now, probably!"

The lavender mare let loose of the younger filly and went galloping up the aisle, bowling over one of the undergrads as she shouted at the top of her lungs. "Spike! SPIKE! I need you to take a letter!"

Sweetie Belle stood with wide eyes and watched the older unicorn recede in a cloud of dust and fluttering papers, the wheels in her own head turning furiously but at a much lower rpm.

Suddenly, a look of ecstatic joy lit her face up and she started jogging in place as an extended note in Triple C escaped her throat, rapidly increasing in volume until cracks started to form on the slates behind her.

She broke into a gallop, leaping lightly over the prone form of the undergrad Twilight had just knocked down as her voice reverberated on the oak panels of the lecture hall. "Fluttershy's gonna be a mommy! Apple Bloom's gonna be an auntie! Miss Twilight! Miss Twilight, can you ask Spike to burp a letter at Scootaloo for me?! Miss Twilight!"

# Chapter 6

Spike the dragon lounged in a nearly pony sized basket next to Twilight Sparkle's desk in the office shared by several of Canterlot U's junior faculty and student teachers, seemingly flipping lazily through an advanced and esoteric tome of magical theory.

In truth, he was perusing the four color panels of the latest issue of Thunderpony tucked neatly into the pages of the larger book. He'd picked up a lot in his years as the lavender unicorn's assistant, and knew how to choose books to get the best startled double takes from any students or faculty who happened to pass by.

His stomach rumbled a bit, and he glanced at the somnolently ticking grandfather clock that stood by the door, noticing that Princess Celestia's beaming portrait on the dial had been replaced by Princess Luna's shyly smiling visage.

As the comic book he read wrapped up on a cliffhanger, he began to mutter petulantly under his breath. "Is this it for our hero? Will Thunderdragon ever... eat... again... Will the nefarious Not A Doctor Yet Twilight Von Sparkle triumph in her sinister scheme to starve him to death?" He snorted to himself and idly turned his attention to the letters column and novelty ads in the back pages.

The spines over his ear holes twitched at the sound of galloping hooves in the hallway outside. With a blase expression he looked up to see Twilight Sparkle attempt screech to a halt on the highly polished marble floor, only to keep sliding on past, her eyes wide in alarm as she began to spin with her hooves splayed wider and wider beneath her. He lowered his gaze back down to an advertisement depicting a smiling family of pink, scaly Seaponies as a softly echoing whoop and a crash sounded from down the hall.

He looked up again sharply as another pony hove into view in the doorway and called after her in a melodious voice he instantly recognized. There was the alabaster white and pastel pink and purple figure of his childhood

crush's younger sister, standing with her green eyes wide with alarm and a hoof to her mouth. "Oh! Miss Twilight are you okay?"

Spike raised a scaly brow ridge. "Sweetie Belle? What are you doing here!"

The young unicorn's innocent as a button face turned toward him, startled. She began to look rapidly back and forth at him and down the hall while hopping on her hooves in a frantic tempo. "Having a foal!"

A small gout of green flame popped unbidden from his throat as he reared up in his basket, tossing the heavy tome aside with a thud. "WHAT?"

Twilight came hurriedly limping into view, her cravat, mane, and tail in disarray. "Fluttershy is having her foal! Right now!"

At this Spike surged to his clawed feet and tumbled out of the basket, scrabbling a moment to get upright, where he looked his guardian in the eyes and laid his hands on her shoulders. "Holey Guacamole! What are we waiting for? Lets go see if we can get a chariot!"

The lavender unicorn gently shouldered him aside as she stepped up to her desk and began to root through the drawers. She pulled a couple of pages of foolscap and an ink bottle and quill out and floated them over to him. "First things first. I need you to send a couple of quick notes off."

The young dragon took the writing implements and nodded, breathing deeply to both calm himself and stoke his internal fires. "Right. The Princess..." He started writing "Dear Princess Celestia..."

He stopped scribbling as his guardian interjected. "Hold it! Yes, I want you to send one to the Princess. Both of them. And then send off a note to the Dean. But first I need you to send one to Rainbow Dash."

She grunted in satisfaction as she tugged a colorful mailer out from under a stack of books, featuring a familiar squad of blue and yellow suited pegasi with a photo inset of a brashly smiling rainbow maned mare. Twilight spread the pamphlet out on a clear spot on the desk with her hooves and peered at it. "She's in... Manehattan! At Madison Mare Gardens tonight. Think you can zero in on her?"

The little dragon puffed out his chest after crossing out the Princess' name on the header. "If I can see 'em in my mind's eye I can drop a scroll right on their head. Rainbow Dash is a no brainer."

Twilight nodded, and proceeded to use her telekinesis to undo her cravat. "Good. All right, I'm on my way. Sweetie Belle, I'm leaving Spike in your care. If you can't get a chariot take any of the morning express balloons. You can use my Royal Transit Pass, it's in the top left drawer of my desk there, and Spike knows where I keep my wallet. Spike, do what Sweetie tells you. Sweetie, listen to what Spike has to say and try to pay attention. I'll meet you both at the Library in Ponyville at lunchtime if I don't see you sooner."

With that she turned and hurried toward a large set of windows framed by potted plants at the end of the row of desks, the western night sky beginning to twinkle over the ruddy glow of the city lights as Princess Luna brought the stars online.

The younger unicorn and dragonet looked at each other in confusion as Spike lifted his quill from the page. "Wait, what? Aren't we taking a chariot together?"

Twilight paused and looked back at them, shaking her head. "That's too slow. Pinkie's "Pinkie Sense" is coming in at full on "doozy". You know what that means. Time is of the essence."

She threw open the windows, climbing up on the sill as a chill mountain wind suddenly blew in, knifing through the stuffy air of the offices and ruffling the leaves on the plants and the papers on the desks. The lavender mare looked over her shoulder. "In fact, you'd better specifically write "doozy" in your letter to Rainbow, and tell her it's at Sweet Apple Acres."

She turned back with a wink. "See you kids in Ponyville!"

She stared out over the ivory towers of Canterlot, looking down the vastness of the valley toward the canopy of clouds gathered over the distant hamlet where she'd found all of her most beloved friends. Closing her eyes, she centered herself, concentrating on the sun blessed apple orchards and sweet scent of hay and earth of a particular farm where she'd spent so many glorious summers. Her brow furrowed as she bunched up

her rear legs and crouched in a starter's position on the windowsill.

Sweetie Belle leaned in, speaking to Spike in a silvery whisper as her earnest green eyes grew wide. "Uhhh... She knows she's not a pegasus... right?"

The little dragon's own green eyes narrowed as Twilight's horn began to shimmer and spark. "She's not gonna... oh wow, she is!" He threw up an arm to shield his face. "Don't look directly at..."

Before Spike could finish Twilight Sparkle pushed off from the window and launched herself into the air, her hooves thrown wide as she sailed over the campus so many stories below. Sweetie Belle shrieked in alarm as a sphere of blinding white flared, throwing everything in the office into stark black as rectangular beams of hazy light shot forth between the window frames.

A split second later, all the young unicorn could see was luminous spots dancing before her eyes.

Spike peered over his upraised arm as the primrose colored mare slumped heavily onto her rump beside him. The stars twinkled cheerily over the warm blaze of the sunset in an empty, deep purple sky. He muttered under his breath as he resumed writing on the parchment in his claw.

Sweetie Belle's voice came out in a low vibrato next to him. "S-spike. I can't feel my face..."

The young dragon nodded vaguely. "That'll pass. Do you spell "doozy" with a Y or an IE?"



# Chapter 7

The ponies gathered in the parlor of the farmhouse at Sweet Apple Acres sat in silence, too anxious to talk but still drawing comfort from each other's presence.

Caramel shared the love seat with Pinkie Pie, gamely trying to sip his coffee or take a bite of a pfeffernusse without spilling or getting crumbs all over due to his fiancée's relentless oscillations.

The pink mare herself was looking a tad green around the gills, and was uncharacteristically uninterested in any of the apple based baked goods freely on tap in the kitchen.

Rarity huddled on the couch wrapped in a rustic quilt, her mane bound up in a red and white checked towel, a cup of tea cooling on a barrel converted into an end table next to her. She was looking a bit peaked herself, her violet eyes never settling for long on any particular point in the room, although whether it was from her recent ordeal or simply from being immersed up to her horn in the Apple family's down home country decor she declined to say.

Granny Smith sat placidly on a rocking chair, humming tunelessly to herself as she worked at knitting a set of foal booties with a beatific expression on her wizened face.

Apple Bloom sat beside her on a little stool and busied herself carving a small figure of a pony out of a block of apple wood, letting the shavings flutter quietly into a bucket on the floor.

Applejack's physical nature was getting the best of her at the moment. Lacking a quiet hobby to occupy her mind and without even the minimal distraction of feeling under the weather like Pinkie or Rarity, all the blonde farm mare could do was pace, which was even more infuriating because she was trying her best to walk softly and not disturb the occupants of her brother and sister in law's room.

The orange earth pony's head whipped around as a blinding flash of light blossomed outside, followed by a yelp and a splat and the frantic barking of Naomi, starting from a point under the porch and then moving out into the courtyard.

Applejack rushed over to the radiator, plucking up her drying hat and flipping it onto her head, then galloped out the door, screeching to a stop on the rain dampened planks of the front porch as the other ponies craned their necks in curiosity. Apple Bloom dropped carving and knife into the bucket with a plunk and rose, following her sister outside and taking up a position at her side, her brow sternly furrowed.

Naomi was running laps around a steaming, hemispherical crater in the yard, from which a mud and soot smeared unicorn rose shakily to her hooves, a plume of grey smoke rising from the tip of her glowing horn as it faded from white-hot to yellow to ruddy red. The new arrival shook her head and blinked, and then gave the Apple sisters a grin, her violet eyes and white teeth showing plainly in her soot blackened face.

An equally wide grin spread across Applejack's face, causing her freckled cheeks to bunch up under her smiling eyes. She bounded down the steps and slid down over the lip of the crater, throwing her front hooves around the unicorn mare's neck. "Howdy, Sugarcube! Glad you could make it."

Twilight Sparkle hugged Applejack back with shaky limbs. "At least an acceptable percentage of me did."

Apple Bloom let out a sigh and turned toward the door with a lash of her tail. "I'll go n' fill up th' tub agin..."

As soon as Applejack had led a slightly disoriented and staggering Twilight Sparkle inside, Rarity was on her feet and hurrying to join them, followed closely by Pinkie who didn't get up so much as allow her vibrations to carry her off the edge of the love seat and onto the floor. The quartet of dear friends, two thirds of the Elements of Harmony, all embraced and exchanged warm greetings with one another as Caramel and Granny Smith looked on.

When the group hug disengaged, the lavender unicorn looked expectantly at her friends. "How's Fluttershy doing?"

Before any of them could answer, a fearsome shriek like a roaring mantichora came from the cloistered back room, followed by a voice the group of mares had first heard when the chaos had reached its absolute height at that first Grand Galloping Gala they'd attended so many years ago. "YOU DID THIS TO ME YOU BIG... LUNK-HEADED... BRUTE! NO! YOU KEEP BREATHING! THAT'S RIGHT, TRY TO KEEP BREATHING WHILE I STRANGLE YOUR STUPID HEAD OFF OF YOUR BIG... FAT... RED NECK! LET GO OF ME YOU NAGS! I'M GOING TO STRANGLE HIM! LET ME UP SO I CAN STRANGLE MY HUSBAND!"

In the stunned silence that followed, only the sound of Granny Smith's low chuckle and the rhythmic clack of her rocking could be heard. The old mare smiled fondly as she knitted. "Such a sweet filly. I sure as shootin' weren't so gentle with my husband when I was a-birthin' my first."

The group of younger mares merely gaped at her, and looked up in unison as the bedroom door opened with a soft click. Nurse Redheart came tottering out, her nurse's hat askew. The sounds of low murmuring and sobs could be heard from the dim room behind her. She gave them a glassy eyed smile before glancing in the elderly Apple clan matriarch's direction and clearing her throat. "Um..."

Granny Smith kept gently rocking with her eyes on her knitting. "China hutch by th' kitchen door, third drawer down."

Nurse Redheart nodded and stumbled to where she'd been directed, pulling open the drawer and lifting out a small jug marked with three X's. With shaky white hooves gripping the sides, she pulled the cork with her teeth and set it aside, then raised the jug to her lips and took a long pull from it. She coughed, wiped her mouth with the back of a hoof, replaced the cork and then very carefully replaced the bottle, slid the drawer shut, then turned and crossed back to the door.

After staring long and hard into the room, the pink maned medical mare set her hooves, adjusted her hat, hiked her tail, and strode back inside, pulling the door gently closed behind her.

# Chapter 8

A pair of pegasi lounged on a terrace outside the VIP suite at Madison Mare Gardens, looking down at the busy street in front of the stadium's main gates. Down below, a cyan pegasus mare with a multicolored mane and tail stood with folded wings amongst a throng of colts and fillies, looking for all the world like a swan swimming in a lake of swirling manes, tails, stubby horns, and small fluttering wings. She was dressed in a sweat stained, form fitting blue and yellow bodysuit with jagged lightning motifs, the signature uniform of the celebrated Wonderbolts Stunt Flying team.

Shootin' Star popped a grape from a nearby fruit tray into his mouth and cast a scathing glance at the spectacle below. "Just lookit' that show boatin' glory hog down thar." He muttered, his Appleloosan drawl more pronounced than usual. "She just cain't git enough, can she?"

The lean, blaze yellow mare reclining on a deck chair next to him shook her head, ruffling her fiery orange mane, and chuckled, fixing the younger stallion with a wry gaze accentuated by deepening lines in her face. "I think you need to consider a couple things when it comes to Rainbow Dash, rookie."

The stallion shook out his dusky purple wings and returned the older pegasus' gaze, rising to the challenge with his ears laid back to either side of his stark white mane. "Oh yeah, like whut, Miz Spitfire?"

She shook her head slowly, and turned her attention back down to the milling, multicolored crowd clustered around the bright rainbow nucleus below. "Well, for starters it's been what... an hour and a half, two hours since the show wrapped up? The rest of us have gotten back to the locker rooms, showered, had a brush down, hit the buffet..." She glanced down the length of the terrace at a slightly paunchy, sky blue stallion who was devouring a stack of pies at one of the umbrella shaded tables and rolled her eyes. "... a couple times in Soarin's case, and have been sitting out here enjoying the cool night breeze and a fine selection of fruits and sparkling spring water. Meanwhile, our gal Dash down there's still suited up and has been workin' that crowd of kids since her hooves hit the ground."

She turned back to look at him with a knowing smile. "I know you're jealous of all the attention she gets as our solo headliner. She spent plenty o' years flyin' formations like the rest of us, y'know. She worked her tail off and then some to get her place at the front of the stage."

The rookie Wonderbolt sighed and nodded, his defiance softening a bit. "Aw shoot, I know it. And even I gotta admit the fans love her."

Spitfire grinned and looked back down at the bustle below. "Sure, but the real secret, my young bucking bronco, is that that mare is absolutely head over hooves in love right back at the fans. She'd rather pull out her own pinfeathers than send a single one of those kids home disappointed if she can help it."

The older mare sighed as she watched Rainbow Dash work the crowd. "Which is why I gotta sit here watching you slobs decimate the catering instead of going back to the hotel for a shot at that nice soft bed. I'm gonna give her fifteen more minutes before I have to pull rank and drag her tail outta there."

Spitfire's sharp pegasus eyes narrowed as a small green flash popped over Rainbow Dash's head, coalescing into a glowing roll of parchment that unfurled in front of the rainbow maned pegasus. The blazing yellow mare pursed her lips. "That's a new one. Guess some unicorn really wants her autograph..."

She cocked her head as Dash reached up and grasped the parchment in her hooves, her cyan wings flaring. Her brow furrowed as she intently watched the colorful pegasus dust off from the middle of the crowd of fillies and colts and hover above them, reading and re-reading whatever it said on the sparkling roll of paper. Spitfire got to her hooves and craned her neck over the railing as down below her teammate cast wildly about and darted for a nearby concession stand, gesticulating her hooves and wings wildly to the heavyset earth pony who was busily stowing his stock of Wonderbolts memorabilia and closing up shop.

The veteran stunt flyer turned to Shootin' Star with a concerned look on her face. "Somethin's up. You boys stay here and guard the buffet."

With that she launched over the rail and fluttered down toward the streets below.

The blaze yellow mare touched down next to Rainbow Dash to find her shoving something soft and lumpy down the front collar of her body suit, muttering to herself all the while.

"OhmygoshOhmygoshOhmygoshOhmygoshOhmygoshOhmygoshOhmygo sh"

Spitfire cleared her throat and leaned in to establish eye contact. "Uh, somethin' goin' on that I should know about, Rainbow Dash?"

Dash started and turned to her team leader, passing her the rolled parchment as she pulled her cowl back up over her ears and put her flight goggles back on. "Uh, yeah. Something really big has just come up. I'm sorry to do this to you guys, but I gotta take a little time off, like right now. A couple days at least."

The older mare scanned the writing on the note. "Well, you've certainly racked up plenty of frequent flyer miles, girl. Normally I'm the one begging you to take a little time off."

She handed the parchment back to Rainbow Dash with a quizzical expression. "Care to translate this for me? Who'd ever mistake you for Princess Celestia, for starters, and what the hay is a "doozy"?"

The rainbow pegasus let out a clipped chuckle and shook her head as she tucked the letter under a wing and lowered her goggles in place. "Long story short, one of my oldest, best friends, like ever, is giving birth to her firstborn foal as we speak and if I wanna be in Ponyville when it happens I've gotta go like right now, okay?"

Spitfire's eyes widened, then her face cracked into a grin as she shook her head and reached out a hoof to give the younger mare a playful shove. "Yeah, I know, I know. "Never leave a friend hangin'." Permission granted. Just promise me you won't break too many windows on the way there, okay?" Two mares shared a brief hug. "Give your friend my congratulations."

Dash stepped back and snapped her a salute with a lopsided grin. "Will do,

now if you'll excuse me I've got a few more ponies I don't wanna leave hangin'."

With that she trotted over to the milling throng of young ponies and flapped her wings, rising into the air over them. She cleared her throat and addressed them in a loud stage voice. "Hey fillies and colts! Something really huge for me personally has just come up and I gotta take off now. I'm really sorry I'm not gonna get a chance to talk to each and every one of you."

She held up her hooves for quiet as the assembled youngsters protested. "But as a way to make up for it I'm gonna do a special stunt that they don't let me do very often, dedicated to you, the colts and fillies, who did us, the Wonderbolts, and me, your pal Rainbow Dash, the totally awesome honor of coming to see our show."

She pointed a hoof to the southwest. "If you'll all keep your eyes trained on the horizon over there, you're gonna get to see something really cool, if I may say so myself. So I guess this is so long for now. Stay awesome! Stay cool! Stay in school, be good for your folks, and remember this. I might not be the best pegasus in the world, but you all are the best little ponies in the world."

The young ponies cheered and clomped their hooves on the cobblestones as Rainbow Dash saluted them. She then beat her wings to gain some altitude. With a powerful thrust, she launched into the twilight sky, trailing a rainbow contrail behind her as a blast of wind blew discarded programs and stray candy wrappers and scattered popcorn into the air.

The throng of fillies and colts stared raptly as the streak of colors narrowed to a distant point, before suddenly blossoming into a radiating halo of rainbow hues that lingered like a beacon against the velvety purple backdrop of Princess Luna's night. A chorus of wonderment rose from the little ponies' throats, crescendoing as about a minute later the distant roar of an explosion reached them on the heels of a stiff breeze from the direction their heroine had vanished.

Spitfire leaned against the concession table, smiling fondly. She was sure that she saw the twinkle of a couple cutie marks coming in on some of the young pegasi hovering over the cheering crowd. She looked up at the



terrace above, and suppressed a chuckle as she spotted Shootin' Star craning his neck with his hooves hooked over the rail, his wings flared, his jaw hanging slack, and his eyes as wide as saucers.

She shook her head as she took wing. "And that, my little cowpony, is how you get the fans' attention."

# Chapter 9

A blare of brass rose from the gramophone in the corner, a bright sting that heralded the rise of a driving bossanova beat formed by a backbone of piano, rhythm guitar, bongos, and maracas. A vibrant orange pegasus mare sashayed out onto the compressed clouds of the studio floor, a gauzy skirt of purple, red, and gold swaying and floating around her hips as she shook them in time to the music, the butterfly and flowers cutie mark that adorned them seemingly brought to life by her movements. She clenched the long wire stem of a silk rose in her teeth, with a spicurl of her magenta mane hanging down roguishly over her right eye.

As the trumpets began to shimmer around the core of the rhythm, she was joined by a strutting pegasus stallion wearing an embroidered jacket and a wide brimmed hat with little red pompoms hanging at intervals around its circumference, a picture of a mango adorning the lime green hide of his flanks.

The two circled, drawing ever closer as the driving tempo and flamboyant brass heated up. Their eyes locked, and the mare went into a rapid spin around the rearing stallion, making it seem like he was suddenly dancing with a small, orange and magenta tornado. She stopped with a flourish in front of him, her colorful skirts coiling and uncoiling around her. The stallion hoisted her into the air over his head. With a flap of her wings she lifted off, followed closely by her partner as they ascended rapidly in a crisscrossing flight path that mimicked the swoops and surges of the brass, meeting near the ceiling as the music reached a crescendo.

A huge boom shook the building, causing the record to scratch and begin skipping. The two pegasi were jarred out of the air and plummeted to the compressed clouds below, landing in a tangled heap of limbs and wings in the middle of the dance floor.

The upended male's left hind leg twitched spastically and a low moan escaped him as the young mare bounced to her hooves, her eyes wide as she stared at a blaze of colors flickering in through the large windows near to the studio's ceiling. She spat out the bent stem of the silk rose and

dusted off, coming to a stop in a hover with her fore-hooves and nose pressed against the glass. Her elegantly curled magenta tail lashed behind her and a broad smile rose to her lips as she spotted the tell tale circular ring of colors generated by a sonic rainboom.

She narrowed her eyes as she noted the direction of the rainbow contrail running through the expanding rainboom ring's center. "Hmm. Ponyville, huh... I wonder if..."

She was startled out of her thought as a small burst of green flame spiraled into the shape of a rolled up bit of parchment next to her head. It fluttered down toward the cloudy floor below, but the orange pegasus mare pushed off from the window and dove, catching it up in her fore hooves at the last second. She hovered for a moment, reading the note's contents with a wide smile growing across her face.

The orange pegasus let out a whoop and shot across the dance studio, banking hard and vanishing behind a rattan changing screen. Her colorful skirt flew up over the top and drifted gently down to the floor as she emerged from the other side clad in a black bomber jacket festooned with a myriad of colorful buttons each bearing the image of a cutie mark.

When she reached the door she screeched to a sudden halt and turned to look back at her dazed dance partner, who had managed to get himself seated upright, his eyes spinning and the little red dinglebobs that dangled from his crumpled hat still waving crazily as he weaved back and forth.

She gave him an apologetic smile as she called out to him. "Sorry, Mango Salsa, I gotta scoot. I'll be back from Ponyville before the end of the week."

He shook his head to clear it, a look of alarm crossing his face as he turned to her with wide, pleading eyes. "But Senorita Scootaloo, the regional championships, they are this weekend! And we still need to work on the cha cha!"

She gave him a lopsided grin. "Tell you what, you work on your cha, I'll work on mine, and we'll put 'em together when I get back. Gotta go!"

With that, she zipped out the door with a beat of her graceful wings, sending a little puff of mist up in her wake.

The pegasus stallion slouched on the floor and brought a hoof to his forehead. "Ach du lieber..."

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After Twilight had arrived the waiting had turned much more convivial. Once the lavender unicorn had cleaned up and gotten some tea and pie in her, the old friends had fallen to chatting, catching up on all the events both large and small that had transpired since she'd left Ponyville to begin her doctorate at Canterlot University. She saw Rarity on a fairly regular basis as the alabaster mare had begun to split her time between her old boutique and her new one in Canterlot, but it had been months since she'd gotten to talk with Applejack or Pinkie Pie. The blonde farm pony was happy to finally have something to occupy her mind that didn't involve tip hoofing a furrow in the parlor floor, but Pinkie was unusually withdrawn. The constant vibration of her Pinkie sense and attendant queasiness it brought was getting to her. For her part, Rarity loved to gossip, even if she'd heard most of the stories her friends were telling, and had perked up immensely.

The white unicorn stirred a spoonful honey into her tea as she looked wistfully over her shoulder at the closed door they were all waiting to see open with good news. "I'm hoping once she's recovered I'll be able to drag Fluttershy back to the spa. The poor dear stopped going on our weekly visits when she started to show. Didn't like all the attention from the other mares in town, even though it was nothing but compliments and well wishes. You know how she is."

Twilight nodded with a smile as she sipped her tea. "Mmm. I miss joining in on those sessions myself. None of the spas in Canterlot are quite the same as Aloe and Lotus' place, and they're all far too pricey for a grad student."

Applejack cocked an eyebrow as she munched on a pfeffernusse. "Don't ya got a royal grant from th' Princess, Twi?"

The lavender mare rolled her eyes. "Well, I forgot to add pony pedis and mud masks to my proposal when I submitted it, AJ." She gave a shrug and set her cup back onto the gently floating saucer. "I don't think I could justify those to the Chancellor of the Exchequer."

Rarity drew herself up in sudden enthusiasm. "Oh! Ideeee-a! We should all go together while we're here. I for one will undoubtedly need a couple of sessions to get myself back in proper form after tonight."

Applejack grinned over at Pinkie Pie. "If we brought Pinkie along, we could get a whirlpool bath without them even runnin' th' water jets."

The pink mare's eyes narrowed grumpily, as far as could be determined in their constant up and down oscillation. "Oh Ha Ha."

The blonde earth pony's eyes softened along with the tone of her voice. "Aw, I'm just joshin' ya, Sugarcube. How ya holdin' up over there?"

Pinkie let out a shuddering sigh and swallowed hard. "Oh I'm d-d-doing okay, I g-g-guess."

Twilight shot her friend a pitying glance. "I wish I'd gotten around to somehow understanding your Pinkie Sense better, then maybe I'd be able to help you."

The shuddering pink pony shrugged. "Thanks T-t-twilight, b-b-but I g-g-guess I just gotta ride it-t-t..." She paused in her staccato reply, her blue eyes going wide "Ooh! C-c-c-combo!"

All eyes turned to face her as a look of concentration formed on her vibrating face. "Ear f-f-flop, knee t-t-twitch, eye f-f-flutter!"

Rarity cocked an eyebrow at her over her tea cup. "Darling, how in the world can you tell that?"

Pinkie stomped a hoof, an edge of frustration on her voice as she shouted at them. "EAR FLOP-P-P, KNEE T-T-TWITCH, EYE FLUT-T-TER!"

Galvanized by this proclamation, all the other ponies began to look around warily. Twilight called out in alarm. "Stay back from the doors!"

Pinkie Pie let out a tsk that sounded like the tapping of a typewriter and rolled her jiggling eyes. "N-N-NO! Not-t-t that c-c-combo! The r-r-rainbow one!"

Twilight, Applejack, and Rarity all looked at one another, each trying to process this information as they spoke in unison. "Rainbow?"

Their eyes went wide as the sound of a distant boom echoed in the distance. Applejack and Twilight leapt to their feet, the lavender unicorn carelessly tossing aside her teacup which was caught in midair by Rarity's magic. The two mares ran to one of the side windows and peered out, and saw a circle of bright colors expanding in a glorious radius over the horizon.

The blonde earth pony reared up and put her hooves on the sill, shouting in amazement. "Sweet Celestia's unshaven fetlocks! Sonic rainboom!"

Twilight pushed her muzzle against the glass, furrowing her brow as she muttered equations under her breath. She turned to Applejack with alarm. "We've only got a couple minutes."

The farm mare pushed off of the windowsill and galloped back into the parlor. "Incoming! Everypony shake a leg!"

# Chapter 10

Granny Smith stayed in her rocking chair knitting merrily away as all the younger ponies in the parlor leapt to their hooves and went thundering out the front door into the drizzling rain of the darkened courtyard. The wizened mare shook her head and chuckled to herself over the clack of her needles.

Applejack skidded to a stop and started to bark orders, her tail lashing behind her. "Apple Bloom! You go and rustle up as many lanterns as y'can, light 'em up, and git Rarity t' help ya hang 'em in the treetops in a line toward th' barn! Caramel! You come with me to the barn and help me drag th' big hay wagon out into th' yard. Twilight! I need you t' whip up any spells you might think'll help! Stay here and keep an eye peeled, and holler if ya see her! She'll be comin' in hot! Pinkie, you..."

As the other ponies scattered to their tasks, the blond farm mare paused and looked back at Pinkie Pie, who stood jittering up and down on the porch with an expectant look on her face. Applejack pursed her lips with a slight shake of her head. "Pinkie... Carry on!"

The pink mare raised her hoof to her forehead in salute, producing a sound like a woodpecker tapping on a coconut. She winced and lowered her hoof to the porch where it and the other three hammered out a steady cadence, her wide blue eyes watching as the others launched into their frantic preparation.

Pinkie barely sidestepped in time as Apple Bloom came galloping out the door with a half dozen or so lanterns balanced on her back or with their handles clenched in her teeth, with Rarity following close behind her. The young mare stumbled when she cleared the porch steps, sprawling in the mud with her hooves pointing in all directions, scattering the lanterns with some breaking as they hit the ground. She scrambled to her feet, kicking and shattering another one as she stomped her hoof. "Aw, horseapples!"

Applejack's strained, grunting voice sounded out from the barn. "Apple Bloom, you do NOT use that sorta language when we... g-got company!"

The younger Apple sister, Rarity, and Twilight turned to see the orange earth pony hopelessly entangled with Caramel in the draft harnesses but still trying to drag the huge, tottering wagon out through the barn doors with what legs she could manage to bring into contact with the slippery ground. The tan stallion hung upside down from the wagon's central pole with his hooves in the air, a stunned look on his face, which began to grow red in the cheeks as a stream of expletives issued forth from between Applejack's teeth with rising vehemence and volume.

Apple Bloom shouted across the courtyard at her as she tried to gather intact lanterns. "Applejack! If'n that's the kinda language YOU use around company I don't even wanna think about how y'all talk when yer by yerself! I don't even know what half o' them words mean!"

Rarity turned her attention to the shattered glass on the ground and began to pluck it up piece by piece, while Twilight galloped over to the trundling hay wagon, set her hooves, and sparked her horn to life. The wagon inched along a bit faster, but not by much.

Applejack grimaced at her as they both fought against the haywain's bulk. "Can't your consarned magic pull this dadgummed heap any flippin' faster, Twilight?"

The lavender unicorn gritted her teeth at the strain and screwed her eyes tightly shut. "I'm sorry! I still haven't recovered from that long distance teleport! I'm sorry! This is the best I can do! I'm sorry!" The farm mare lapsed back into a whole new stream of blistering language in response.

Twilight's ears laid back tightly to the sides of her head as she tried to pour on more mystical juice. Behind her, Apple Bloom and Rarity had begun bickering about whether they should light the remaining lanterns or pick up the broken glass, which the white unicorn maintained was dangerous to leave lying about.

Meanwhile, Applejack had exhausted her surprisingly thorough vocabulary of vulgar phrases and had simply resorted to bellowing incoherently at the top of her lungs, which in turn set a disoriented and spooked Caramel screaming in unison and flailing his legs at the sky. Twilight Sparkle's head began to throb, with a feeling like her horn was going to burst like a firecracker, and she joined in the howling chorus with a high pitched shriek



of her own.

"EEEEAAAGGHHH!!!"

The unicorn mare felt the tap of a hoof on her shoulder as she paused to draw in a ragged breath, and turned with slitted eyes to see a cyan face cocked quizzically to the side, looking at her through a pair of goggles with familiar, maroon eyes. "Uh... Hey Twilight. What the hay is everypony doing?"

Rainbow Dash ruffled her wings and folded them down alongside her blue and yellow bodysuit, surveying the suddenly frozen tableau with a bemused look on her face. The silvery tinkle of another lantern dropping to the ground and shattering broke the stunned silence, with only the staccato of Pinkie Pie's hooves on the porch and the soft patter of the receding rain otherwise producing any sound.

The rainbow maned pegasus took in the scene, then looked at Twilight and Applejack with a smirk on her face as she reached up and pushed back her goggles. "Wait... Let me guess. You guys were prepping a landing zone for me, right?"

She cocked an eyebrow at her friends as they fidgeted with embarrassment. "Look, I know I deserved the name Rainbow Crash back in the day, but what kind of Wonderbolt would I be if I had a dirt dinner every time I went groundside?" At that, her stomach rumbled, and she blushed slightly. "Speaking of dinner, I'm starved. You guys got anything to eat?"

Caramel's tremulous voice sounded from down by the ground, his hoof waving vaguely toward the farmhouse as the blood rushed to his head. "P-pinkie made pimple knuckles..."

Applejack cleared her throat. "Uh... yeah, I reckon we could fix ya up with some vittles if somepony'd help me n' Caramel outta this..."

At this Rarity tossed her disheveled mane and set aside the glass shards she'd gathered in a neat stack on the ground. She walked up and brought her glowing horn to bear on the straps and buckles lashing the two earth ponies together. "Here, darling, let me help."

Apple Bloom looked ruefully down at her mud caked chest and belly and turned toward the house with a weary sigh. "I'll go draw a bath. Again..." She cast her sister a smug glance. "And I'll be savin' ya an extra cake o' soap for your dinner, big sis."

When Caramel and Applejack had finally been disentangled, with Twilight lending a telekinetic assist to Rarity's deft skill with all things woven, tied, or stitched, Rainbow Dash surged forward and scooped the blonde farm pony along with the two unicorns up in a group hug, smiling fondly as she drew them close and nuzzled their cheeks. "I miss you guys SO MUCH out on tour. It's good to see you."

She looked up expectantly at the porch. "Hey Pinkie, care to... join... us..." She trailed off in disbelief.

The earth pony mare had become little more than a pink blur, shimmering in place to a steady buzzing of hooves on wood that grew louder and more intense with each second. Caramel stood with eyes wide and jaw dropped, uncertain of what to do. If his fiancée was going to explode he wasn't sure if the proper response was to be by her side 'til the end or well clear of the blast radius. Rarity, Twilight, and Applejack all turned and adopted a similar dumbfounded expression.

Pinkie suddenly stopped vibrating and launched into the air, her outline squashing and stretching into non-euclidian contortions for a few reality warping seconds before she snapped back to normal. She bounced to a stop on her hooves with a stunned expression on her face and let out a little "ooh!". Her legs splayed out beneath her and she flopped down onto her belly on the porch, panting for breath.

Caramel galloped over to her and caught her up in a hug. "Oh, sweetheart, are you okay?"

She hugged him back and kissed him on the cheek as the other four mares came trotting up. "Yeah, but my back right ankle is tingly."

Pinkie looked up past her fiancée's shoulder to her mare friends with a knowing smile and spoke in a soft voice. "That means, it's a filly..."

# Chapter 11

A sound of hoof steps in the doorway caused the group of ponies to look up and see a tired looking Nurse Redheart, standing with Granny Smith at her side. The ancient mare was dabbing her eyes with the hem of her shawl and grinning from ear to ear. The white medical pony smiled at Applejack. "Cabbage Leaf was wondering if the Apple family would like to come in and meet their newest member."

The blonde earth pony drew herself up and caught her breath, tears welling in her eyes. Her voice trembled as she answered. "Why yes, I surely would, Nurse Redheart. I s-surely would."

With that she traded some quick hugs with Twilight, Rarity, and Rainbow Dash, and hurried up the steps, pausing and giving Pinkie a hug as well, and then fell into step beside Granny Smith, helping the Apple family's matriarch make her way back inside. Apple Bloom came bounding excitedly down the stairs with a towel draped over her withers, a beaming, disheveled Zecora in tow. The younger sister took up her position on the other side of her grandmother, and the three mares headed back the hall toward their brother and sister in law's bedroom, while the white earth pony nurse and the zebra herbalist leaned on one another in happy exhaustion.

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A short time later the parlor was full of happy chatter from contented ponies. Pinkie and Twilight had ventured into the kitchen and brought out a selection of apple pies, apple tarts, apple cider, and fresh bread with apple butter, spreading the delicious, home cooked food on the rustic coffee table for the gathering of friends to enjoy, while Rarity served tea to Zecora and Nurse Redheart and made light conversation. Caramel had been moved to the love seat, where he dozed peacefully with his head propped up on the foreleg rest.

As Rainbow Dash removed her jumpsuit to get more comfortable, the lumpy little paper wrapped bundle she'd acquired at Madison Mare Garden tumbled out. She chuckled to herself as she picked it up off of the floor and

began to unwrap it.

Pinkie Pie smiled, managing a little bounce despite her exhaustion. "Ooh! You brought a present! What is it? What is it?"

The pegasus grinned self consciously. "Just a little thing. Check it out."

She set a little stuffed pegasus pony figure on the coffee table, its tiny cyan blue snout and wings poking out of a yellow and blue bodysuit, a felt mane and tail printed with red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple stripes.

Dash glanced up at her friends with a wry smile and cocked ears. "Okay, so I know what you're thinking. There goes Rainbow floating her own cloud again, but it's not like that." She rubbed the back of her head with a shrug. "Okay, it IS a little like that. Can you believe they made a doll of me? Oh... My... Gosh..."

She reached out and gave her tiny duplicate a poke with her hoof, causing it to flop onto its side. "When I was a little fledgeling someone gave me a Fire Fly doll, back before I even had any idea what a Wonderbolt was. I carried that thing with me everywhere I went, and I mean everywhere. Even after she'd turned all gray and her mane and tail fell out and Mom had to find a new button to replace one of her eyes. She was my buddy and my good luck charm. I've still got her stashed in my steamer trunk while I tour."

The pegasus mare reached out and righted it, casting a fond smile toward the hallway where the Apple family had retreated, before meeting her friends' eyes again. "I figure if I'm really lucky, Fluttershy's foal will maybe do the same, which will be great because then it'll be like we're hangin' out all the time, even though I'm out touring the world with the team." She gave a shrug with a slight blush on her face. "I guess that's kinda silly..."

Rarity gave her a warm smile. "Not at all darling. I think it's a wonderful gift, and a fine sentiment."

Pinkie Pie picked up the doll and made it hop along the table, her eyes furrowed in playful concentration. "You realize, of course, that I will now proceed to pester you until we all have our very own little Dashie." She pointed the tiny figure at Rainbow Dash and made it mime as she spoke in a squeaky little imitation of her friend's voice. "That's right!"

Twilight chuckled. "I might have to ask for an extra one for Spike. I hope you don't mind being teamed up with Thunderpony."

Rarity was looking thoughtful, and she chimed in. "Darlings, I think we all could follow Rainbow Dash's example here, and I think I have a good idea how we might do it."

Pinkie set the doll down gently and grinned "Y'know, we never did have a foal shower for Fluttershy." The pink mare lapsed into such a perfect imitation of her yellow pegasus friend that they could have been considered the same mare. "She was always like 'oh no, don't bother' 'no need to make a fuss over me' and 'that's okay'." She gave another little hop and reverted to her normal cheery tone. "But now I bet we could talk her into it, 'cos it wouldn't be a party for her so much as a party for her foal!"

Before anypony else could respond, they heard hoof steps in the hallway. All heads turned at the sound of Applejack's gentle voice. "Speakin' o' which, how'd you all like to come n' see my n-niece?"

With a broad grin, Rainbow Dash was instantly on her hooves. Rarity and Twilight stood, giving polite nods to Zecora and Nurse Redheart as the two mares beamed up at them over their tea cups. Pinkie glanced at the slumbering Caramel and kissed him on the cheek. He stirred gently and muttered "puppy nuggets" under his breath. She smiled warmly down at him before giving a little hop and following after her friends.

Applejack led them quietly into the stillness of the rustic, farmhouse bedroom, the warm light of the lamps turning the air to soft gold.

In one corner, Apple Bloom and Granny Smith sat on a soft throw rug leaned against one another, sharing a joyous moment as grandmother and granddaughter. The stocky figure of Cabbage Leaf busied herself folding towels and repacking her saddle bags, a wide grin on her face as she hummed softly to herself.

On the large, soft bed in the center of the room they saw Fluttershy, nestled against Big Macintosh with a quilt laid over her back and wings, both ponies looking thoroughly exhausted with their legs tucked under them.

The butter colored pegasus' coat was rough and matted with sweat, and her long pink mane was frayed and hanging limply on either side of her face, but despite that she seemed to almost glow with an inner light, her bearing as graceful as a deer from the deep glens of Whitetail Wood. Her eyes were closed, as she dozed peacefully.

Her husband's orange mane was frazzled as well, with sweat on his brow and a different sort of moisture glistening on his freckled cheeks. His gaze was locked on a tiny rounded shape curled up against his massive chest atop his tree trunk thick, muscular forelegs.

The little bundle was the color and texture of a rosy peach, with a pair of impossibly delicate, downy wings folded against the curve of her back. These stretched out and refolded themselves as the foal squirmed in her father's lap and rolled over with a yawn followed by a tiny whisper of a sigh, revealing a sweetly sleeping face with even rosier cheeks and a wisp of silky pink mane falling across the filly's untroubled forehead.

At this feather light stirring, Big Macintosh's lower lip and chin started to tremble, a look of such profound love etched upon his normally impassive features that it was clear for all to see that not even the Princess's who moved Equestria's very sun and moon could ever hope to dislodge his tiny daughter from her seat on the throne of the giant earth pony's heart.

Pinkie Pie drew in a huge gasp of breath, causing the others to glance sharply over at her, expecting some sort of raucous outburst, but instead the pink mare gave a small hop and let out a soft little "yay".

At her side, Rainbow Dash was intoning a very faint chant of "ohmygoshohmygoshohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh", her sandy voice cracking slightly as tears came to her eyes.

Twilight Sparkle was at a loss for words, and was uncertain that she would be able to express what she was feeling at that moment in one of her letters to the Princess even if she had the rest of her life to compose it.

Applejack spoke up with a voice thick with emotion. "Ain't that just a sight? I'm so proud I'm fit t' burst right now."

Rarity's voice came hushed and trembling. "Oh, she's ever so beautiful..."

Big Macintosh nodded haltingly, his own deep voice faltering as he forced his reply over the stumbling blocks of his own emotions. "E-eyup."

At the sound of her husband's voice Fluttershy stirred and opened her eyes, which sparkled like emeralds in the dim light. She craned her neck and planted a tender kiss on her massive stallion's cheek.

She turned and looked up at her dearest friends with a smile, her mellow voice soft but clear in the stillness. "Girls, I'd like you to meet my daughter, Windfall Apple."

She inclined her head and nuzzled the little filly's cheek, prompting another tiny sigh. "Windfall, I'd like to introduce you to your Aunt Rainbow, your Aunt Rarity, your Aunt Pinkie, and your Aunt Twilight."

She raised her shining eyes to meet her friends' gaze. "I know that's a lot of names to remember, but don't worry, you'll learn them all. I've got a lot of stories to tell you about them."



# Epilogue

They visited for only a short while, whispering heartfelt congratulations and blessings on the infant foal, before Cabbage Leaf and Granny Smith shooed everyone out so the little family could take their rest.

Windfall was wrapped in a soft blanket and laid in a beautiful crib that the younger Apple sister had constructed out of the family's namesake wood, the fragrant planks sanded to such smoothness that they felt like silk to the hoof. Apple Bloom beamed with pride to see her niece nestle in with another precious sigh, as Applejack smiled and ruffled her little sister's mane.

Big Macintosh and Fluttershy climbed back onto the bed together after the lights in the room were lowered, sharing a kiss as Granny Smith gently closed the door.

The aged matriarch of the Apple Clan said her thanks to Cabbage Leaf and slipped her a bag of bits, that the stocky earth pony in turn cheerfully split between herself, Nurse Redheart, and Zecora. Their business concluded, the midwife, herbalist, and nurse headed out into the misty dark of the early morning, the three parting with a hug and mutual well wishes.

Her eyelids drooping with weariness, the old grey mare extended the hospitality of Sweet Apple Acres to anyone who wanted to spend the night, then let Apple Bloom help her up to bed.

This left the five old friends quietly chatting in the parlor, each of them thoroughly worn out but savoring the stillness and camaraderie too much to want to let it end. Rarity shared the idea that had been forming in her mind after Rainbow Dash had shown them her gift for Windfall, and the mares quietly drew their plans for the next day.

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It was bright and sunny the following afternoon, as Twilight, Spike, Pinkie Pie, Rarity, and Sweetie Belle came walking up the path to Sweet Apple



Acres, happily chatting and enjoying one another's company after a delicious lunch at a new place in town called the Trotton Inn.

The three older mares each carried a small, brightly colored gift bag on their back. Spike, now much too big to ride on Twilight, walked on all fours alongside her, the waving of his tail and flaring of his stubby wings revealing his excellent mood.

As they drew close to the Acres, he sniffed the air and licked his lips. "Mmmm. Smell those apples. It's been too long since I've gotten to taste some good old Sweet Apple Acres apples."

Twilight cocked an eyebrow down at him. "Spike, we just ate not ten minutes ago."

He looked back at her quizzically. "And your point?"

Pinkie giggled as she "poinged" along beside them. "It's on her head, silly!"

Twilight chuckled and rolled her eyes. "Pinkie..."

The four mares and attendant dragon arrived to find the farm bustling with activity. A trio of earth pony farm hands paused to tip their straw hats in friendly greeting before hefting their shovels and getting back to work filling in the crater left behind by Twilight's teleportation spell.

As they approached the porch, they saw Apple Bloom passing up a bulging sack of pink envelopes stamped with apple based cutie marks to a hovering grey pegasus mare, who's eyes became a little more crossed as she hefted its weight into the air and fluttered erratically away over the trees.

When the younger Apple sister caught sight of them, she gave a little hop and galloped inside. Moments later she emerged with Scootaloo in tow, the slender orange mare following with kicked up heels and flaring wings. Sweetie Bell let out a happy shout like a chime and bounded forward to greet them.

The three young friends circled one another, trading hugs and enthusiastic greetings, before as one throwing back their heads and hollering. "CUTIE

MARK CRUSADERS AUNTIES! YAAAAYYY!"

With that they thundered inside, slamming the screen door behind them. Applejack's stern admonishment could be heard in reply from the depths of the kitchen. "Consarnit! Keep it down you silly fillies, Big Macintosh is tryin' t' sleep y'know!"

On a little puff of white cloud high over the rolling hills of the apple farm, Rainbow Dash was stirred from a light doze by the distant cacophony. She craned her neck over the edge and smiled as she saw her friends standing in the courtyard far below.

The cyan pegasus took a mass of the cloud in her forelegs and buried her face in it, inhaling deeply and enjoying the familiar scent of the clouds over Ponyville for a little longer, then stood and stretched. She bunched up her athletic body and launched into the air, dispersing the cloud with her kick off, and traced a lazy spiral down to the farm below.

Dash let out a chuckle as she touched down beside them. "Geez, those kids are louder than the crowd at the Hippodrome. Hey guys!" She reached up to give Spike a playful noogie. "Woah! You're gettin' big, Spike." The little dragon laughingly batted her hoof away and gave her a hug, before they fell into step with the rest of the group.

They made their way up onto the porch, where Spike rose to a standing position and knocked on the screen door with a clawed hand.

Applejack came ambling out wearing a gingham apron and a wide grin on her face. "Howdy gals. Come on in and set a spell. I just put some apple cobbler in t'bak."

The blond farm pony beckoned her guests into the parlor, which was currently aflutter with birds and crawling with little forest animals, including a veritable carpet of rabbits, many of which clustered around an ottoman where their stern patriarch Angel sat alongside his mate Cupid, holding court among the critters like a pair of long eared, fuzzy monarchs.

Granny Smith sat in the same rocking chair as she had the night before, still knitting away at another booty, while bunnies and chipmunks dodged the rockers.

Fluttershy lay serenely on the couch, looking all the more radiant for having gotten a little sleep and a good brushing, with little Windfall tucked into the crook of a foreleg. The three teenaged mares were hovering over the tiny pegasus, cooing and aww-ing as the peach colored foal stared up at them with wide, grass green eyes.

At a nod from Twilight, Spike walked over and peered over the back of the couch, instantly drawing the little filly's rapt attention. "Whoa. She's tiny!"

The lavender unicorn chuckled. "You weren't that much bigger when I hatched you, you know."

Fluttershy smiled up at him and leaned in, speaking softly in her daughter's ear. "Who is that? Is that your Uncle Spike?"

Windfall just stared, fascinated, while her mother gave the young dragon a cheerful grin. "Hi, Spike. It's good to see you, and it looks like Windy thinks so too." She gave him a wink. "You've grown into such a handsome young dragon."

As Spike tried to conceal his blush the butter colored mare turned her attention to her other friends as they gathered around the couch. "Hello again, girls. I hope you all got some sleep last night."

Twilight returned the pegasus' fond gaze. "Well, you know what I night owl I am. How about you, Fluttershy?"

The new mother let out a soft sigh. "Oh, I got a little. Windy here had me up to feed her a few times. Big bunny and the girls have been taking shifts with her to let me get a little rest here and there when she's not hungry. He's passed out in the bedroom right now. I was going to lay her down for a nap in a few minutes."

At this Pinkie Pie gave a little hop. "Ooh! Then what are we waiting for? We brought presents!"

The pegasus mother smiled down at her filly. "You hear that, Windy? Your Aunties brought you something." She looked up at her friends "That's wonderful! You didn't have to."

Applejack nodded at the fashion designer unicorn. "This all was Rarity's idea."

The alabaster mare preened, but tipped her horn toward the rainbow maned stunt flyer. "But Rainbow Dash provided the inspiration."

Dash grinned and shrugged. "Yeah yeah, well lets stop congratulating each other and get on with it. How about you go first, Rarity?"

The unicorn gave a genteel nod and levitated her gift bag off her back, opening it with her magic. A small white satin unicorn doll with purple ribbons for a mane, amethysts for eyes, and three sapphires for a cutie mark on each flank floated out and drifted to the couch, where it landed on the cushion in front of mother and filly's fascinated gaze.

Fluttershy gasped. "Oh Rarity, that's so precious!"

Rarity smiled at the compliment. "Thank you, darling. If I'd had a little more time I would have made it a few dresses."

Pinkie Pie started bouncing on her hooves. "Who next, who next?"

Rainbow Dash nudged her with a hoof. "How about you, Pinkie. You look like you're about to explode a couple times."

A wide grin spread across the pink mare's face. "Okie dokie gnocchi!"

She plucked her bag off of her back and set it on the floor, fishing around inside until she came out with another pony figurine, this one crafted out of pink marzipan with curly pink frosting hair and a goofy expression with crossed eyes and a little sugary tongue sticking out of its mouth.

Fluttershy let out a giggle as she examined it. "Oh Pinkie, that's so cute!"

The pink mare's grin widened. "Thanks! Ooh, and just so you know, if she eats this one I'll always be happy to make her another one." She turned to the rainbow maned pegasus. "You go next Dashie. I can tell you're stalling for some reason."

Caught off guard, Rainbow dithered a moment, then gave a shrug and acquiesced. "Okay, okay. Well, this isn't a hoof made, one of a kind original like the others, but I hope you and Windy like it anyway." She reached under her wing and produced the Wonderbolts souvenir doll that bore her likeness and set it down in front of Fluttershy and Windfall.

Fluttershy's eyes widened. "Goodness! Oh Rainbow Dash, that's so cool!"

Pinkie cocked her head and looked at the cyan pegasus as Rainbow dug her hoof on the floor. "What are you talking about, Dashie? Of course you made your gift. You worked on yours a lot harder than any of us did."

The pegasus looked dubious. "How do you figure that, Pinkie?"

The bubbly earth pony started to hop in place. "You had to become a Wonderbolt, and then become a big enough star that a toy company would want to make a doll that looked like you."

Twilight broke her observant silence to chime in. "And how many other dolls can you say went through a sonic rainboom with the one and only Rainbow Dash? I'd say that makes it a one of a kind."

Dash blushed and rubbed the back of her multicolored mane. "Aw geez, guys..."

Applejack stepped forward and set down a little basket. "And anyway, yer not the only one who had a li'l help with her gift. If'n y'don't mind, Twi, I'd like to give her mine next."

The lavender unicorn nodded her assent and the blonde earth pony lifted out a wooden figurine of an earth pony with knotted yellow yarn for hair and a coat of orange paint with three red apples on each flank as a cutie mark.

Fluttershy smiled up at her as she set it down in a line with the others. "Applejack, I love it!"

The farm mare bobbed her head at her younger sister. "Heck, I just painted it. Apple Bloom carved it, and Granny Smith helped me with the tail and mane."

Apple Bloom chimed in. "It was gonna be Holly Hobbyhorse, but I think this is way better."

At this Rarity spoke up. "Applejack, darling, this suits you to a T. The wood came from the land you tend and the Apple family pitched in to make it so wonderful." She gazed at the little pony figurine with a critical eye. "There's only one thing missing."

With that, she levitated a tiny cowpony hat out of her bag and deftly placed it on the figurine's head.

Applejack squinted at the doll's headgear, then cocked an eyebrow at the fashionable alabaster mare. "Are those rhinestones on the brim there?"

Rarity raised a hoof to her mouth with a smug chuckle. "Just making it twenty percent cooler, my dear."

The others laughed as the farm pony rolled her eyes. Pinkie turned to the other unicorn. "Okay, Twilight, you're up."

The lavender mare gave a cryptic grin and levitated her bag to the floor in front of her. She was met with looks of confusion as a book floated up out of the bag and laid itself down on the couch cushion behind the row of pony figurines.

Fluttershy craned her head forward to read the title, her brow furrowed in puzzlement. "'The Friendship Letters, A Correspondence with the Princess by Twilight Sparkle' Oh... It's... It's your book... Thats... nice."

Applejack pursed her lips. "Uh, Twi... y'know we all have copies of yer book already."

Pinkie giggled. "And Windy's too little to read yet, silly!"

Rainbow Dash cocked an eyebrow. "I don't get it, Twilight."

Rarity huffed. "Indeed. This wasn't what we agreed on, darling."

Twilight held up a hoof. "I wasn't finished. Just watch."

She inclined her head as her horn began to softly glow. Before the mystified eyes of the other ponies, the book started to shake, and then with a sudden pop it transformed into a lavender unicorn figurine with a silky dark violet mane streaked with purple and pink.

The full sized version looked up at them all with a satisfied grin. "And magic makes it all complete."

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The wind rustled the acres of apple trees outside and fluttered the blinds of the bedroom window as the muffled sound of happy chatter and laughter could be heard through the walls.

Little Windfall Apple, the first of many beloved foals, lay asleep, the soft blankets rising and falling almost imperceptibly with the rhythm of her breathing. The pale yellow face of her mother, her warm aquamarine eyes radiating love between the silky pink locks of her mane, gazed down on the tiny pegasus like Celestia's sun and Luna's moon on Equestria. She reached up and nudged the mobil hanging over the apple wood crib, causing the five gently swaying little ponies to prance their lazy circle.

No matter where her friends were, across the whole wide world, they would always be there in spirit, watching over her children with her.

~~~ The End ~~~