



Nightfall at Sweet Apple Acres

By Midnight Shadow

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A Brief Editorial Note

It's clear that all these stories are connected... Unfortunately they are not presented in chronological order in this collection; I personally do not have the time to go through and read them all to find out, if I could even bring myself to do so.

I would be most appreciative if someone could possibly read these for me and tell me in which order they occur, so I might arrange them properly.

Thank you.

-MaxVeers

Nightfall at Sweet Apple Acres

Summer and Blossom walked hoof-in-hoof towards Sweet Apple Acres, the ancestral home of the Apple Family Clan. Summer Sparkles had visited before many times, he'd practically grown up in the area, but this was different. This time he and his prospective bride Apple Blossom were seeking the approval of the matriarch of the Apple Clan, Tweed Apple.

Usually she was 'Grandma Apple', or just 'Grandma', but today - today she would be Madame Tweed Apple, head of the clan. Never had so few steps into somewhere so familiar been so frightening. He was practically shaking.

"Sshhh dear, it's only Gramma Apple. You know ol'Gramma." Blossom laughed, punching her fiance on the flank. He winced, the Apple's were well known for their physical attributes.

"Blossom, I'm gonna ask her for your hoof in marriage - what if she says no?"

Apple Blossom laughed, a silvery twinkling laugh, "Gramma approves of you, you great fat lump."

"But...I'm a unicorn."

"So's she, if you hadn't noticed."

"That's different!"

Blossom laughed again, pulling him onwards, "I don't see how. Come on, silly."

They trotted through the gates and were mobbed by two hyperactive foals, her sister's kids, Cherry and Tango. Cherry the earth pony had kept her mother's name, Apple. Tango was Tango Star - another unicorn - with his father's name. It seemed being an Apple was in the blood, but love knew no boundaries.

"Heeeeyyyy...oof! My, you're gettin' big!" cried Summer, swinging the earth pony foal up onto his back, where she stayed, giggling. The unicorn

foal trotted alongside, still hyperactive and a trouble maker, but just for now preferring to act the bigger sibling. Just like her ma' had been way back when, before Apple Bloom had grown up and taken on the yoke of the clan.

"Uh-huh! Mamma says I kin start apple-buckin' this season!" said Cherry Apple, giving Summer a demonstration by drumming on his back. He grinned weakly at Blossom, who giggled again, looking away.

"Does she now? How about you Tango?" he coughed.

"I dun like apple-buckin'." replied the unicorn youngster, shaking his head.

"I bet you like eatin' apple fritters though, huh?" prompted Blossom.

"Sure do, specially when Gramma makes them. She ain't made 'em in a while though. Says her hooves dun work too good."

Blossom winced, the years had been kind to Tweed Apple, but there had been so many of them. Her husband, Big Macintosh, had been taken many summers ago and she'd never been quite the same since. He'd been the love of her life.

Grandad Apple, Big Apple, Big Mac - he'd had many names but he had been the beloved patriarch to all of them. She knew Tweed still had a picture of him on her dresser that she kissed every night. She wiped a small tear from the corner of her eye before anypony noticed as they came upon the grand old lady herself.

Tweed looked up from her reverie, "Why I do declare, if it isn't young Apple Bloom."

Apple Blossom kissed her grandma on the cheek, "It's Blossom, Gramma - Bloom's my ma'."

"Huh, likely story, you're too big to be that sweet li'l foal I used to buck on mah back none too long ago."

"It's true Gramma, it's true." she smiled a melancholy smile, Tweed Apple's eyes didn't work too well, but they had a fantastic view of the past. They could see for years to a place only Tweed herself could visit - her memories were like bright shadows in panes of glass, so near yet untouchable and remote.

Truth be told, if Blossom was honest with herself, too many years had gone by without her finding *her* one true love. That had changed with the arrival of Summer.

"Well now then, I suspect ol' Granny Apple here knows what's coming next. This strapping young thing must be your beau!"

"I am indeed, Miss...Madame Apple." he inclined his head respectfully.

"Pssh, don't you try none of that sweet-talking young unicorn. Stand straight, tell me your name."

"I am Summer Sparkles, born in Hoofington. My family-"

"Sparkles? Sparkles? Any relation, Bloom?" Tweed looked worried for a second, but was comforted by her grand-daughter.

"Blossom," prompted Apple Blossom, but she shook her head in answer, "I don't think so, Gramma."

Summer looked at Blossom with a critical eye, "What does she mean, relation? She's an Apple, isn't she?"

"By marriage, yes."

"Don't you interrupt now," said Grandma Apple, getting up shakily out of her seat. Blossom and Summer both rushed to help but she waved them off, "I don't need no help from you young whippersnappers. Attend your Grand-mama and she will tell you a story. A long time ago - before you were born, when your mothers were small, as small now as Cherry and Tango are today, I had another name. That was...that was before Big Mac - Celestia rest his soul."

Tweed Apple stopped for a minute - misty eyes unable to see ahead of her, gaze firmly set upon the past, filtered through her memories; a fine red stallion, broad of chest and strong of muscle. She continued narrating, as she walked towards the house on shaky legs. The pair followed her.

"A long time ago, I was the student of Celestia herself, I studied in the great school for gifted unicorns in Canterlot."

Summer looked at Blossom with an 'is she crazy?' expression on his muzzle. Blossom shook her head and mouthed 'no'.

Summer's eyes went wide, "Grandma - how could this be? Celestia has had no pupil for decades! The last pupil she had..."

"Aye, young unicorn. Twilight Sparkle, defeater of the nightmare queen, defender of the dragon realm. Ambassador to the griffon lands. And finally, wife of Big Macintosh Apple, my most important role of the lot."

"But but but..."

"You think I wanted to keep that silly name of mine when all I wanted was to settle down with my friends?"

"Your...friends?"

Tweed Apple - formerly Twilight Sparkle - stopped again, "Doesn't this boy know anything? I may have to reconsider if you can't educate him on Apple Family history proper, my gal!"

"But you can't be..." said Summer, shocked into silence.

They had reached the house, Twilight eased the door open with her hoof when her magic failed her and stepped through, almost out of breath from the trip, "Bloom, be a dear and fetch me my box. You know the one, on my dresser. Mind you don't touch Big Mac now, I won't have it."

"No Gramma, I won't touch Big Mac." said Blossom, not bothering to correct her grandmother on her name, "I'll fetch your jewelry box for you."

Twilight turned to Summer, and hiked up her skirt which she wore against the chill, even though it was early summertime to display a cutie mark - a tad faded with age as her coat was, but still there, still strong.

Summer gasped and reached out a hoof to touch it, stopping only inches away, "It's true. You are one of the six!" he looked up, mouth dropping.

"Indeed, young unicorn. There were six bearers of the Elements of Harmony; Laughter, Kindness, Generosity, Loyalty, Honesty - and Magic. I'm the only one left now, charged with this sacred duty by Celestia herself."

“Did you really defeat Nightmare Moon?”

Twilight Sparkle laughed, a racking cough ending the joyful noise abruptly, “Aye, that we did, in her own ruined castle too. We freed poor Luna from her prison and restored the sun to the world. Those were the days, we were carefree and footloose. I saw a Sonic Rainboom, you know!” Twilight punctuated the statement with a prod of her hoof into the young unicorn’s ribs.

“That old mare’s tail?” he raised an eyebrow.

Twilight wheezed out a laugh, looking up as Blossom came down the stairs with Twilight’s box in her mouth, “I saw three of them. Three! Rainbow Dash, the fastest flier in all of Equestria. After her wings no longer carried her, the fight went out of her. She was the first to go. Live fast, die free. Rarity, that grand old dame, went in the middle of her greatest fashion show, a smile on her face. She even upstaged herself! Fluttershy passed away peacefully surrounded by her animal friends. She’s buried in a cairn up on the hills where we fought that dragon...”

“You fought a dragon? Come on...”

Blossom put the box down and scowled at Summer, “If Gramma says it, I believe it.”

Twilight carried on oblivious, “Pinkie Pie died in her sleep; her last, greatest party given to Celestia and Luna themselves the night before. And finally Applejack. She was Grandma Apple, you know, right up until she died. I carried the title, but she carried the name.”

“I remember Grandma Applejack. The best apple-bucker in all Equestria.”

“That she was, my gal, that she was. All the others, but myself and her, have passed on their gifts. The duty fell to me, and it now falls to you.”

“But...”

“As matron of the Apple Clan, I hereby give my consent to Summer Sparkles and Apple Blossom to wed - and many healthy foals may they have, with many more happy years together.”

The pair blinked, they hadn’t even *asked*.

“Don’t you look at me like two star-crossed foals, don’t think that I don’t know what you’re visiting boring old Gramma Apple for. Come ‘ere gal. You too, Twinkles.”

Twilight Sparkle, grand old dame of the Apple Clan, pulled her granddaughter and grandson-in-law-to-be into a hug. Her own eyes were wet with tears by the time she pulled back.

“I have to give you something now, something important.” she said, looking each in the eye with a piercing gaze.

“But...”

“Goats butt, grandson-in-law’s are quiet and respectful. Same for you, Missy. Long ago,” Twilight opened the box, and pulled out a necklace with an apple-shaped gem on it on it, which she put in front of Blossom, and a bejewelled tiara, which she put in front of Summer, “long ago Applejack and I were given these. They are the elements of Honesty and Magic. I have been the bearer of one, and the safe-keeper of the other. That duty now falls to you.”

“I...do you really think I’m the embodiment of Honesty?”

“I...er...I don’t have to wear the tiara, do I?” asked Summer.

Twilight blinked, looking at them for a second, before bursting into laughter so explosive she ended up with a hacking cough and had to sit down on her rump. She wiped away tears from her eyes and settled in to a quiet throaty giggling, “Oh my no - you aren’t the bearers. They’re for your foals.”

Twilight pointed to Blossom, and the halter, “She will take to her gift immediately - but you must keep it from her for at least ten summers. This is no toy and she must be old enough to understand what she takes on.”

Twilight turned to Summer, “And he will take a long time to warm up to his gift. Don’t you tell him it won’t always look like that, it’ll be fun to see his face when it changes to be more...appropriate. He will be head-strong, talented - he may even become a Student of Luna, or of Celestia, as I was.”

Summer and Blossom looked at each other, "Gramma, how do you even *know* we're going to hav-"

"Didn't I say never to question Gramma Apple?"

"I...uh..."

"Well now, I believe I just did if I didn't earlier."

"But...Celestia will take no pupil!" said Summer, lamely, for wont of saying something to such a preposterous idea.

"Aye," said Twilight sadly, "and she won't, not whilst I live and breathe. She may have tricked me into naming my only son Morning Sparkle, but she does have her standards. Go now, take them. Take the box, I no longer need it. The two most important things in there no longer belong to me."

"But...Grandma! Your pictures, your keepsakes, don't you want them?"

"They're memories, child, and I have a lifetime of those where nopony can take them from me. Grandma is tired now - help an old lady to bed?"

As Apple Blossom led her grandmother, the legendary Twilight Sparkle, up the stairs to bed, Summer sorted through the pictures. There they were, the legendary six. If he'd had any doubts before, with these pictures they were gone. Twilight with Gilda, the warrior princess of the High Reaches Griffon Clan. Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, Rarity, Pinkie Pie and Grandma Applejack when they were young - and a dragon, a baby dragon of all creatures!

He looked up the stairs, living near a legend like that, and he hadn't known a thing!

Twilight slept easy that night, although getting into bed had been as difficult for her old bones as ever. she leaned over the side of the bed, body protesting, to give the picture of her true love, Big Mac, a kiss before sinking back gratefully under the covers. The night was warm but she felt a chill deep in her bones. The one task she'd had left had finally been completed. She could rest. Her breathing grew deeper as she looked out of

her window at the stars and the moon. They were so very, *very* bright tonight. A faint breeze was blowing, bringing with it scents of summer.

"No Apples in summer," she said, laughing to herself at the double meaning - his son would be like Tango. Very much loved, but no Apple.

"Apples only in autumn," she sighed, eyes wet with tears before they closed, "before the fall."

The wind blew stronger and with it came a voice, calling her name, "Twilight...Twilight Sparkle..."

Twilight opened her eyes, the night was crystal hard but her eyes were gummy. She rubbed a hoof to clear her sight, "Who's there? I know that voice...I defeated you years ago! Show yourself, Nightmare Moon!"

The answering laugh was soft, "Oh dear Twilight, that task is over and done with. You freed me. I've been Luna now for many a year, and I still thank you for all you've done. Your tasks are complete."

"Luna?" asked Twilight, she felt strange, weak.

"Yes Twilight, and Celestia is here with me."

"Where? I can't see..." the night seemed to be growing dim now, the clear brittle brightness fading to black.

"I'm here, my child, my most precious student." it *was* Celestia!

Damn these old hooves of mine, thought Twilight to herself, *a chance to speak with Celestia again and I'm too feeble to...*

"Fear not child," said Celestia's voice softly, kindly, "don't get up, we're here."

And they were, their presence surrounded her like a warm gentle cloak, it was so peaceful. She smiled, "You were gone so long, Princess. I missed you so much."

"Sshhh, don't worry about that now. We're here *just* for you, Twilight, to take you on a journey."

“What? Where? But little Bloom...”

The laughter was like the wind through blades of grass, leaves on trees rustling, almost as if nature itself, both Night and Day, was chuckling at her inanity - but with love, “Young Bloom will be the new Granny Apple, another task you are free to pass on. Come with us now, come!”

“But where? I can’t see...I can’t...breathe, I feel so weak.”

“Then let us carry you...home.”

She felt herself lifting from the bed, floating up towards the sky where suddenly the stars returned as if from a thick fog. They were glorious and bright, the moon was a glowing jewel and it almost hurt to look. She flowed onwards, buoyed by the twin Princesses at her side which she couldn’t see but could only feel, somehow flying - it had to be their magic, she reasoned.

They flew on towards the moon, it’s brightness expanding until it filled her vision with bright, warm light. As it grew, the tightness in her chest eased, the aches in her joints vanished and she felt whole again; hale, hearty, and...alive.

The tired old purple unicorn in bed gave one last breath, held it for just a moment, let it go - and was gone. The form grew still and cold. Her body wasn’t found until morning, and many tears were shed that she had left, but none could deny the smile still left on her muzzle was true and warm.

The Last Sonic Rainboom

The knock on the door was light, respectful. The ex-captain of the wonderbolts deserved and demanded no less.

"Hold on, I'm coming, I'm coming." called Rainbow Dash as she eased herself to the door. It was an old grey mailmare with faded yellow mane and tail. She'd been grey when she was younger, but now was grey with age.

"Hey Derpy, it's nice to see you again!" said Rainbow with a smile.

"Good morning Miss Rainbow. Your package came, all the way from Zecora in Foalaska State! That's a long way for a potion bottle."

"Well, she's the only one who still knows how to make it, Derpy."

"What's it for?" the mailmare asked after setting the package on the table reverently.

"Ohh don't you worry. This and that. Age, mostly."

Derpy Hooves giggled, "I didn't know age came in a bottle."

"Heh heh, good one. Listen, can you do me a favour? I've got a special package I want you to deliver, personally. It's for young Scootaloo."

"Young? She's not been young for many years, Dash."

"Younger'n me, and that's younger enough. Wait here."

Derpy waited patiently whilst Rainbow hobbled upstairs. She cursed her weakness as the disease made her joints painful. She'd coped with it for many summers but her patience had worn thin. The light blue pegasus with the legendary rainbow-hued mane fetched the package for her good friend Scootaloo. She could trust no other with it, and would have delivered it herself but her wings would never carry her that far. Derpy was different however. Derpy could be trusted.

“You make sure you give it to her in person, now! No pony else is to touch it but you, no pony else is to open it but Scoots, you hear me?”

“You insult me, Dash. You know the mailmare code as well as I do.”

“That I do, Derpy, forgive me. This is just one of the most important packages you'll ever deliver, and the most important package I'll ever send.”

Derpy left, and Rainbow sat for a while just listening to the tick-tock of the clock on the wall. She looked around her cloud castle – a home she'd had for many years. Always dependable, well-built. She'd never filled it with a family but had had plenty of friends. She spied one picture in particular; Soarin and Spitfire. Theirs had been an unconventional friendship but it had lasted for their entire lives.

“So many good times, Soar. I'll miss you, Spitfire.” a single tear rolled down the cheek of the old pegasus as she kissed her hoof and pressed it gently to one and then the other. She berated herself silently for such foolishness, same as always. She had few regrets for the way she'd lived her life and would do it all again in a heartbeat. For now though...for now she had her medicine to take, to ease the pain in her joints and make movement bearable again, and another old friend to meet once the worst had subsided. The potion was foul, rendered fat of some bizarre animal, but it worked. Almost. Afterwards, she pulled on a neck-strap bag and put some envelopes in it. Each had one name written on the outside, very familiar names to the bearer.

“You want my balloon?” asked Twilight, rocking back and forth in the chair set in the middle of the Sweet Apple Acres' front yard, watching as Rainbow hung up the neck-pouch carefully on a tree-limb and eased her slow, painful way into the yard. Twilight sighed to herself, the disease would only get progressively worse and was the cruellest of curses to fall upon the pegasus, to strip her at such a young age of not only the joy of flight but making even basic movement a chore to be endured rather than an ability to enjoy.

A gaggle of Apple-clan foals played at Twilight's hooves, and her grown-up son Morning Sparkle – oh how he hated that name, even though

he knew Auntie Celestia had given it to him – was at her beck and call, allegedly on a lunch-break, more likely checking up on his mother.

Rainbow couldn't help but chuckle even as shooting pains shot up her fore and hindlegs. The great Twilight Sparkle, now incognito with the daft name of "Tweed Apple". She'd married Big Mac – they'd had one fine unicorn son and a whole herd of earth-pony fillies. She'd been granted the title "Granny Apple", though she deferred to Applejack when big decisions were to be made. Some things wouldn't change until it was time. Big Mac adored her, and she him. Even at his advanced age he could still be found daily in the fields, pulling the same plow.

"Just for one last flight, Twilight. For old times' sake. You know my wings won't carry me so well no more. My joints ache, I'm all but grounded, but I'm a pegasus. I have to fly. If I can't fly, what am I?"

"And you figure a balloon ride is a suitable way of getting around for a pegasus?"

"Please, Twilight?"

"You don't even have to ask, Rainbow. Take it, take all the time you need."

"This means a lot to me, Twilight. I'll commandeer Spike for the afternoon if it pleases young Morning here, I need him for maneuvers."

"For a dragon who is older than me," said Morning, "he sure foals around like little Apple Bloom used to before she had Blossom."

"Dragons see the world differently, Son. You'll get used to it." commented Twilight disapprovingly.

"He deserves some time off in any case. Please take him, I'll get more work done at the library without him for the afternoon."

Rainbow had tea and apple-based refreshments – brunch, Applejack called it - and they reminisced about old times. Eventually Rainbow turned to leave, gasping with pain at the renewed movement. It seemed to Twilight that the pegasus had something to say, but she seemed to be having a hard time spitting it out.

"Twilight, I want you to...remember me how I was, okay?"

“What in tarnation are you talking about, Rainbow?”

“If...if something were to happen, you'd remember me how I was, wouldn't you?”

“I'll never forget you, Rainbow, what on Equestria has gotten in to you?”

“Nothing, nothing Twilight. Forget I said anything. Thank you for the loan of your balloon, Spike will return it after.”

Twilight shook her head at the retreating pegasus and went back to her seat. She settled down in it and rocked thoughtfully, thinking. When she glanced around, she noticed a pile of letters on the table. Twilight knew she'd not put them there – had Rainbow?

“Did that damn fool hot-head forget her mail?” complained Twilight, easing herself up. Age hadn't come alone to her either, she huffed. Looking at the tree that had so recently held the neck-pouch, said article of utility-clothing had gone with the mare that was long out of sight down the path towards town. Twilight glanced at the letters; Rarity, Fluttershy, Pinkie Pie, and a letter to her, to Twilight Sparkle.

Twilight ripped open the letter with her teeth – her magic had been on the fritz for a while and sometimes it was easier doing things the earth-pony way. She pulled the neatly-folded page out and smoothed the crease open. Fetching her reading-glasses, she started scanning the text.

Let it be known that this document is

The Last Will and Testament

of

Rainbow Dash

properly known as Lady Windermere Silverhoof

I, Rainbow Dash, being of sound mind and sound enough body to write my own damn fool testament, do hereby bequeath my estate to Scootaloo...

"No!" shouted Twilight, standing up with a start. She opened the other letters, not caring how it would look. Each was a copy of the same document. It named them all as recipients of various personal effects and items near and dear to Rainbow's heart.

One last flight she'd said, thought Twilight, *oh how foolish I was to not see!*

She was too late to do anything. She slumped back in her chair, tears wet on her cheek.

The air was chilly now the balloon was high. She'd had to move fast, but Rainbow Dash had gotten airborne with the help of her draconic buddy Spike. She'd downed the potion in one, it was a unique brew which was quite possibly illegal most places in Equestria and Zecora was indeed the only potion-master able to make it. It featured refined rainbow juice, a blend of exotic ingredients and magic that the zebra-pony refused to speak of. It burnt going down, but warmed her stomach. Gradually as the feeling spread, the aches and pains of age disappeared. She flapped her wings experimentally. The cold and the potion had done their work.

"No pain!" said Rainbow, tears in her eyes – not all of them from the icy chill.

"What's that?" called Spike from above, snaking his head down. The dragon had his claws in the delicate mesh holding the balloon in place and was taking them higher and higher at Rainbow's insistence.

"I was just saying, looks like rain! Way over there, near Canterlot. Can you get us higher?"

"I can go to the edge of space, Rainbow Dash, but you can't. It's getting dangerous for you, we should go down."

“NO!” shouted Rainbow, then she continued in a softer tone, “no, no – for me. One last time, take me up, right up. I touched the stars once, almost, years ago.”

“I remember you telling me. I thought you were dreaming.”

“No, although Twilight denies it now, she helped me do it. I almost killed myself that time. This time I'm going to do things right.” Rainbow added the last sentence almost under her breath as the balloon soared higher and higher. She could see forever, she realised. The whole of Equestria was spread out below like a living patchwork quilt, a sight she'd seen only once before. Now she had her repeat chance. Everything was set. Complete.

“Spike,” she said softly.

“What is it, Rainbow? Do you want to go down?”

“I'm...I'm sorry, Spike.”

“Wait, what? No!” Spike leapt to get his claws untangled from the balloon as a blue shape dropped like a stone from the gondola, but he was too slow. Rainbow had dived over the side, spread her wings, and gone into a powerdive.

Scotaloo looked up as a knock came at her door. Opening it, she saw a mailmare that it took her a few moments to recall the name of.

“Derpy? Is that you?”

“It is, Scotaloo. How are you?”

“What in Equestria are you doing out here?”

“I came to deliver you a package.”

“All this way? At your age?” said Scotaloo, raising her ears in disbelief

“Rainbow Dash was quite insistent. I've not opened it. She said not to, was quite definite about it. Please tell her I didn't.”

Scootaloo took the package. It was pretty small, when all was said and done. It was covered in brown paper and tied up with string. Ripping off the wrapping and opening the box, she searched through what appeared to be wood chippings until her hooves brought up a note, and a hefty necklace. The necklace glinted in the light, the gem set in the middle a stylized lightning-bolt. Scootaloo opened the note and read it:

Dear Scootaloo,

Forgive me.

I should have passed this on a long time ago, but arrogance and negligence kept me from this task. I, the bearer of the Element of Loyalty, now pass it on to you, and you must keep it safe, wield it with care, and pass it on in kind when your time comes.

I don't think I can realistically keep it, not doing what I've done. It takes being loyal to wield it, and I don't have that loyalty any more. Not to my friends, not to you, not to myself. I'm a selfish, stupid old mare, Scootaloo, and I've done you wrong many times.

Let me set this right. I've dispatched the appropriate lawyers and estate-managers to pass on whatever titles I have collected in my life to you. Do with them what you will, but do me one last request.

Be faithful to your friends.

With love,

Rainbow Dash

“What does this mean?” asked Derpy

"It means...it means she's going to do something really, *really* stupid, and I don't think I can stop her." said Scootaloo, glaring at the Element of Loyalty clutched in her hooves.

"Can't we stop her?"

"She's been planning this for a long time, Derpy. It's all up to her now."

Rainbow Dash dropped like a stone, the feeling of speed, the exhilaration of movement enfolding her like a cocoon. She spread her wings and felt the atmosphere bite. The potion was strong. It was a week's worth, all at once. Dangerous levels, borderline poisonous, but Rainbow had no choice. One last flight. One last show of strength. She powered downwards, picking up speed.

The air was tense, thick, the multi-coloured barrier flashed around her hooves like it had so many times before – and like almost all of those times it threatened to overwhelm her. She was wheezing now, wings pumping faster than they had in years, her old battered heart straining, joints aflame despite the numbing potion that burned through her body like wildfire, eating itself to give her a few brief minutes of her youth back. She'd done her best to keep herself in shape, but the disease...it had eaten away at her soul as much as her body. Dark times had followed, until she'd learnt to live with it as a mere shell of her former self.

Then she'd read about the potion, about its effects, and had badgered and pestered Zecora until the zebra relented.

Her heart was beating loud in her ears, blood pumping, spots flashing on and off in her vision, threatening to overwhelm the pegasus. Her lungs ached, her wings were on fire, but still the unnatural energy surged through her body and inflated her worn frame well past endurance as she accelerated, pushed, battered, hammered and finally screamed her defiance with a ragged voice nopony would ever hear at the rainbow barrier. As the ground approached, so much height lost due to age and inability, Rainbow all but begged and pleaded and pushed and pushed until...

BOOM!

The light was blinding, exhilarating, it overwhelmed her senses with power and magic as once more, only three times in living memory, there was a Sonic Rainboom.

The barrier was gone! She was free!

Rainbow rejoiced, her breath caught in her throat as the lightwave crackled and burned around her, streaks of multicoloured refractance dancing in her rainbow-coloured wake. She sped up, set free from the sucking bonds of gravity; laughing, burning with joy, bubbling with life, overflowing with the exuberance of once more, one final time, being a true pegasus.

Idly she wondered, the moments stretching like hours as she sought to prolong the experience, how high she was. With the smashing of the barrier she was freed from the constraints of mere wind resistance, but the sky was growing dark, black almost, and even though it had been far from evening, she swore she could see stars. Either that or her sight was going and they were mere hallucinated spots as her mind sought to placate her brain by conjouring phantasms.

She found it hard to breathe, her blood singing in her ears and her poor, abused heart beating a staccato rhythm that a humming-bird would have been proud of. Suddenly she faltered, a bright, burning, stabbing pain in her chest. Her right wing siezed up, cramping. She began to roll in the air, desperately flapping her left wing. The force of the gale now reasserted itself and snapped it back painfully. Feathers ripped off as the bone shattered and she entered into a spin.

The ground, the sky, the stars, the sea – all scenery jumbled together into a whirling mass that she was unable to make sense of. She was a cannonball of hair, feathers and hooves no longer in flight but on a ballistic trajectory, and with each passing second the roaring in her ears and the shortness of her breath threatened to take the last vestiges of consciousness with them. Rainbow closed her eyes, unable to fight, and she gave in to the darkness.

“...Rainbow...Rainbow Dash...”

Rainbow struggled. Everything was noisy, disjointed. She couldn't see and her chest hurt, her heart...it felt like her heart had burst, "What do you want?" she tried to say, but all that came out was a bubbling expectoration of some fluid that she hoped wasn't blood.

"Don't talk, Rainbow, I'm here."

"Who...?" she said, more in her mind than with her mouth

"Luna, it is I, Luna. I've come to help you, Rainbow, to set you free."

"Help? I don't need..."

"Relax, Rainbow, you have fulfilled your tasks well and I am here to take you home."

"I'm not going back! I'd rather die! I'm a pegasus! I'm a pegasus that can't fly! Don't take flight from me! If I ever touch the ground again I'll never see the sky!"

"Oh Rainbow," said the voice of Luna, somewhere in the darkness, "you flew higher and faster and further than any pegasus before you. They will sing of the Rainbow Mare for generations to come. You inspire dreams, Rainbow, and I'd like to repay you, to give you a gift."

"What gift?" spat Rainbow Dash, "A slow death in a home for crippled pegasi?"

"Oh no, Rainbow. I offer you something else. I offer you a chance to touch the stars themselves."

"No pony can touch the stars. Madness, Luna, Madness."

"You can, Rainbow. Take my hoof, I'll guide you. You won't fall."

"I'm Rainbow Dash, I *never* fall!" said Rainbow, feeling warmth return to her frame at the illusory touch of a hoof to hers.

"You never will, Rainbow, you never will."

Scotaloo looked up as above her in the sky, miles away, a glorious Sonic Rainboom exploded above Ponyville. At that moment, the necklace

around her neck, wet with tears, glowed brightly and *changed* as its new bearer accepted the gift, and the burden that went with it.

“Goodbye, Rainbow.” said Scootaloo.

“Oh Rainbow, what did you do? What did you do?” wailed Twilight as an empty balloon piloted by a very guilty-looking dragon touched down outside Sweet Apple Acres.

“I...I tried to stop her, Twilight.” said Spike.

“I don't think you could have stopped her, my dear friend.”

“Nopony has the right to stand in the way of another's dreams, Twilight,” said a musical voice. A large white winged unicorn alighted softly next to her ex-pupil.

“Celestia!” cried Twilight, “I've...I've missed you. Why are you here?”

“To witness a passing, Twilight. My sister is performing one last duty for Rainbow Dash.”

“Is she...?”

“She...she will never hurt again, Twilight. Her wings are starlight now. Dash has gone where no living pony can follow. But fear not, for in every meteor shower her memory will dance. In every rainbow you'll hear her laughter and the stars themselves will remember her name until they too go out.”

Twilight crumpled the letter to her chest as she embraced her teacher, tears streaming from her muzzle. Celestia held her close until the sobs subsided, just stroking her mane.

On Fragile Wings

Fluttershy awoke. She stretched and winced as her joints played up again. She'd been worried for many a year whether the disease which had struck down Rainbow Dash had caught up with her as well, but the doctors had told her no. They were perfectly normal – if annoying – aches and pains.

As she stood upon her hooves and stretched the last few kinks out, the bunnies crowding in around her tumbled off in a living blanket of warm fur. She smiled weakly, kissing The Angel on his wise head and stepped carefully out of the living cuddly puddle.

“Good morning my dears,” she said, looking down and around at them all. It had started with just one bunny – just the one – that would forever have a special place in her heart. Angel had been his name. He'd been a faithful animal-servant – no, not servant, never a servant. He'd been a friend, a companion, someone to talk to, a great listener and a bunny of very few words. He'd found his own family, something which Fluttershy had never really managed, and had brought them home. From those humble beginnings it had started. Fluttershy's cottage was now home to almost a hundred of the darling little creatures with the head, the eldest, being The Angel and head of the clan.

As Fluttershy made the stately, slow, daily commute between the bower where she slept and the garden she tended, told herself she hadn't needed a family and didn't need too many friends under her hooves.

She paused – that wasn't quite true. She loved her friends, all of them, very deeply – but she didn't need too many to be happy. It was quality more than quantity that mattered to her. With the good friends she had known throughout her life, she was very happy indeed. She had her dear circle of friends, her bunny rabbits and her small cottage on the outskirts of Ponyville where she tended to the sick and injured or the otherwise needy critters. With plenty of sunshine and the wonders of nature surrounding her, she led a full life.

Out in the garden she stopped for a moment – she found herself doing that a lot these days – as the chest-pains started again. She would really have to go see Twilight about them, she mused, but she did so hate to be a bother. She'd always been shy and retiring, a shrinking violet, and didn't see a need to change that now.

Birds sang in the clear blue skies and she felt a song rise in her heart with the play of the warm golden sun on her face. Closing her eyes, she gave voice to the uplifting feeling and started humming. The birds – recently home from a cold winter's getaway in the South – zipped and twirled around her head singing a counterpoint.

She laughed and took a peek, “Are we having a good day my fine feathered friends?”

One of the birds alighted momentarily on her yellow-hued ear and pecked at her pink mane, preening it before taking flight once more and joining it's mate in the skies above her.

“Oh I'm so glad! And your wing is all better, huh?” she smiled as a happy trill was the reply.

The vegetable garden was in full swing and she trotted imperiously through it. Originally a relatively small plot of land, the bunnies had taken over several acres of cropland for their own devices where they tended everything from herbs and spices to flowers to carrots and cabbages. Fluttershy oversaw the management of these works with pride. Her back had been flaky enough these past few years that she'd all but given up gardening for herself, sticking instead to pulling the odd ornery weed and handing out advice:

“A bit more fertilizer, Dizzy – mind the water, Tippy – oh yes, Patch, I think that carrot's quite ready for tea today!”

As she passed she gave her blessings, laid down admonishments and generally made sure that her garden was in tip-top shape. She knew the names of *all* of her charges and not once did she fumble or seek for the right name or title. Some rabbits were diggers, others planters – still others pullers, cleaners or cutters. The first harvest of new vegetables were to be brought in this very day and it looked to be a fine one.

Her inspection done, she retired to the gazebo, where a gaggle of paws and long furry ears bustled out with a tea-pot. She wheezed slightly, holding a hoof to her chest as the pains returned. At her sharp intake of breath, the smallest bunny – who held the title of 'baby' until he was named and replaced in his turn as he had replaced the previous – bounced up and put a worried paw on her flank from his perch on the table.

“Oh don't worry your snuggly wuggly little head, my baby bunny-wunny, Auntie Fluttershy will be fine. It's nothing. How are your lessons coming along?”

Baby puffed up proudly. He thumped first one foot – one, two, three – and then the other foot – once, twice, then he bounded up to Fluttershy's muzzle and gave her five kisses.

“Oh well done! I shall be sure to tell Feather Blossom when she gets here today! She's coming for a visit to see me. Be sure to keep the house tidy now!”

The little bunny nodded and scampered out the way as five larger, more experienced bunnies stirred the pot and strained out Fluttershy's favourite herbal infusion.

Fluttershy had sat and contemplated life for long enough, she decided, as she drained her cup. Feather Blossom was late, and she'd spent so long preparing the surprise. At the sound of hoofsteps echoing up her path, the yellow pegasus snapped back to reality and eased herself into motion. Expecting it to be the golden-and-cream coloured pegasus filly relative, she was already calling out, “Feather Blossom! So good to-”

“Good morning Fluttershy, dear,” said Bright Eyes, customary twinkle in her odd gaze. Instead of the pegasus she'd been expecting, Fluttershy was greeted by the sight of the familiar grey winged mare with the yellow-blond mane and tail. Seven bubbles adorned her flank and she had mail-mare panniers strapped to her frame.

“Oh, oh no! Is Feather Blossom going to be late? Is she okay?”

“Oh don't worry, she's okay but she will be late. They had a bad storm last night and her chariot was delayed. She's safe and sound in Hoofington

and will be in tomorrow. She sends her regards. No letters today, but I felt like the walk. How are you keeping?"

Bright Eyes was one of Fluttershy's trusted friends – a harmless but annoying medical condition meant that sometimes one eye would look off in the wrong direction. She'd never really been teased for it, but she was well-known as the dependable wall-eyed mail-mare of Ponyville. Some called her Derpy Hooves, but Fluttershy always used her real name.

The pair sat down together and more tea was brewed and brought out, followed by some light refreshments. Bright Eyes would be missed on her rounds today, but everypony knew she'd gone to see Fluttershy. Truth be told, a lot of ponies were worried about the yellow pegasus. She was a well-loved old mare and had grown increasingly reclusive as of late. Bright Eyes, no spring chicken herself, took it upon her own head to keep an extra eye out, so could often be found having tea and a light chit-chat gossip session.

They laughed, swapped stories and caught up with the local news. Pinkie Pie was doing well – her own business, Pinkie's Party Emporium, was now the biggest supplier of face-pies, jokes, knick-knacks and tongue-twisting jokes in almost all of Equestria. She hadn't slowed down much, but her customary Pinkie-Bounce wasn't quite so sprightly. Twilight was doing well down on Sweet Apple Acres – one of her filly-foals had just had another foal herself, Twilight's son Morning still hadn't found himself a partner...

"Life goes on, doesn't it, Bright Eyes?" said Fluttershy with a smile, shivering slightly.

"That it does. Aren't you lonely out here?" Bright Eyes sipped her tea, looking solidly at Fluttershy.

Fluttershy shook her head, Bright Eyes *always* asked her that, "Nope, I like things just the way they are. I have my lovely little bunny-wunnies and my birdies and my herb-garden and this suits me *just fine*."

"If you're sure. We miss you down in Ponyville." prodded the mail-mare

"I'll be sure to drop by more often – I'm running low on tea and I need some medicinal supplies for my animal-friends."

“Don't be a stranger then,” said Bright Eyes, getting to her hooves, “I'll send my regards to Twilight, AJ and the gang. We'll have to get together again soon.”

Fluttershy blushed and hid a little behind her graying hair, “Oh no, I don't...I don't do parties.”

“Just a small one – after all, Rainbow and Rarity...”

Fluttershy closed her eyes momentarily, “May Celestia rest their souls.”

“They went the way they'd want to go, Fluttershy.”

“I know,” she winced, “I miss them so.”

“We all do. We miss seeing you too. I'll be back tomorrow to help Feather Blossom settle in.”

“I'll see you tomorrow then, Bright Eyes,” said Fluttershy, giving a little cough as she got back up and stretched her wings. Spots danced in her vision but she tried not to let it show. The mail-mare looked concerned for a moment before turning to leave. The bunnies cleared away the meal as Fluttershy walked inside. Despite the early-afternoon sun she felt a bit of a chill.

Inside, the hut was a bustle of activity, but it ceased the moment Fluttershy passed the threshold. She headed to her favourite spot in the sunlight and settled down onto the mattress. The bunny horde brought out a whole pile of cushions and many of the smaller members of the bunny battalion piled in on top of her. Soon she was warm and snuggly. She kissed each and every one on the head between the ears – they would jump off in turn, take their assigned place, receive her blessing and return in a very orderly fashion.

“Where's Angel?” cried Fluttershy all of a sudden. There was a bustle, and The Angel presented himself.

“There you are! Now listen very carefully my lovely little bunny-friends, I want you to get me something. The package for Feather Blossom from upstairs – can you do that for me?”

The Angel nodded and dispatched a hardy group of male bunnies to fetch it. The package wasn't that big, it had been wrapped up in brown paper and string for delivery to Feather Blossom, but Fluttershy re-opened it. It was still hers after all and she thought she deserved one last look at it.

The package contained the Element of Kindness, a beautiful but hefty necklace with a gem shaped like a butterfly to match the butterflies on her flank.

"Was it really so long ago?" whispered Fluttershy as she looked at it again. Tears stained her cheeks as she remembered all that had gone before. Two very good friends had been lost to old age and infirmity.

The Angel twitched his nose and put a soft paw on her fore-hooves.

She smiled and nuzzled him, "Thank you. Take it away and wrap it back up. It's Feather Blossom's now. She can have it when she gets here. I think it's time for lunch, don't you?"

The rabbit nodded and ordered in his own silent way that the necklace be returned to its storage box and put away.

Lunch was brought out – Fluttershy opened her mouth obediently as the little bunnies forked in her food. She was more than capable of eating by herself – she knew that – but the darlings did like to help so. Eventually it was finished – she didn't eat much. Pegasi were usually hearty eaters but Fluttershy didn't really fly all that much so could make do with a lot less fuel. The remains were cleared away and Fluttershy yawned. It was not very late but she felt tired.

"Angel? Angel? Where's *my* Angel?" she cried, fidgeting. Bunnies tumbled off her as the porters were sent. Reverently a simple grey glazed urn was brought to the almost-frantic pegasus. On the outside was a simple metal plaque which read "Angel" - no more and no less. No more was needed.

This was *the* Angel bunny, passed on from the world many summers before – the life of a rabbit is brief when held against that of a pony, but he had been her first and best friend.

“Oh Angel,” she whispered to the urn, “I miss you so much. I met Bright Eyes today, she thinks I should move to Ponyville. What do you think?”

Fluttershy nuzzled the cold clay pot affectionately and it soon grew warm between her hooves. Once more tears dripped from her muzzle and she remembered the good times she'd had with her friend. Pulling all that was left of his earthly remains closer, she snuggled down under the rabbit-blanket and told Angel of her day; her hopes and dreams, her plans - just as she had every day and would do for always.

Eventually, she slept.

It was night-time. She was startled awake by some noise, some presence – something...or maybe it had just been the call of nature. She eased herself to her hooves as the rabbits around her grumbled and squeaked, but allowed her to pass. She was their Auntie Fluttershy after all.

The fire had burned low and all the lamps had long been extinguished. She'd slept through the evening again, that was becoming far more common these days.

The hut was quiet, with no sounds but the squeaking of a hundred little rabbits and assorted chirps, hisses and purrings of whatever animals Fluttershy was currently nursing back to health.

Her chest hurt again, badly this time and she winced, breathing hard. Her chest was on fire and it felt very heavy, like somepony was sitting on it or pushing against her. She staggered to the front door.

“He-hello?” she called, fearing to open it and let the night in.

“Fluttershy....” came a voice, like a faraway musical note.

“Who...who is it? Where are you?”

“It is I, Luna.” said the soft voice, as the yellow pegasus leant against the hallway wall for support. The pain in her chest...it would get better soon, she reasoned. Maybe she just had to...had to sit down. The door though, she had to open the door first.

With great difficulty she mouthed it open. A sudden gust of wind blew at the door and it knocked her slight frame backwards onto her rump, where she collapsed in an unceremonial heap.

"Wake up, Fluttershy," said the soft but insistent voice of Luna.

Fluttershy remembered now, the voice belonged to the younger of the two eternal princesses of Equestria. She felt a flutter in her chest as she recalled Nightmare Moon, but it soon passed. The pain passed with it, she realized. She started feeling much better.

"Luna? Is it really you? ...You gave me quite a start there! Quite knocked the breath out of me!" Fluttershy tried to open her eyes, they felt strangely heavy. The night air was heavy too, it felt very hard to breathe.

"Indeed it is I, dear Fluttershy. I've come to take you on a journey."

"Me? A journey? Oh no - no, no, no - I couldn't! I have my grand-niece Feather Blossom coming tomorrow and I'll need my sleep."

Luna laughed, a tinkling rain of bells that seemed to dance like starlight, "You don't need to worry about that, my dear. Up you get now, take my hoof..."

"Where? It's too dark to see...and..." she panted, "I can't breathe. I don't feel too well."

"Hush now, take my hoof, it will be over soon."

Fluttershy felt a soft hoof touch her own, warm and inviting. Leaning on it, pulling strength from it, she felt herself rising to her hooves. As she did, she realized she was outside. She looked up in surprise at the sudden clarity of vision. She was feeling much better! The stars were crystal hard, the kind of vibrant sharp-edged pinpoints that usually only came during blackest winter. The moon was full too and glowed with an ethereal light that blanketed the land.

"Oh Luna! It's so nice to see you again!" whispered Fluttershy excitedly. She kept her voice low for fear of waking her darling rabbits, but it was hard hiding the joy in her voice.

"It's..." the princess looked pained for a moment, "it's wonderful to see you, Fluttershy. Now, we don't have much time, you must come with me."

"Why, where are we going?"

"Nowhere far, you won't get tired."

"Is it magic? I haven't felt this alive in years!"

Luna seemed to wince, "You've never felt this alive, Fluttershy....yes, it's...it's a kind of magic." she finished, smiling weakly.

The dark blue mare was bigger now than she had been when the six bearers of the elements of harmony had vanquished her evil alter-ego, Nightmare Moon. Her mane and tail had regained their awesome luster, steeped in the veil of the stars.

Fluttershy smiled, laughing, and jumped lithely from hoof to hoof, "Whatever magic it is, Luna, I wish I could have it always. It's so *wonderful* to feel like this."

"I can only use such magic on special occasions," Luna whispered. Her face smiled but her eyes and her voice were sad, reticent, "Come! Come! I must show you this."

Luna led the way through the undergrowth, skirting the Everfree Forest and heading for a hill. It was called "lookout hill" in rather unoriginal fashion for the simple fact that from the raised vantage point, all of Ponyville and some of the Everfree Forest were spread out beneath it.

"What did you want to show me?" giggled Fluttershy. She didn't feel the cold, although she knew it had to be. It must be Luna's magic, she reasoned.

"What do you see beneath you, Fluttershy?"

"Ponyville! Oh, I see Twilight's Library – young Morning works there now. There's Rarity's Boutique, run by Elusive. He'll have to pass it on soon too...why did you want to show me this?"

"Fluttershy, there's not a pony in that village that doesn't love you, that you haven't helped at one time or another, and I thought you deserved one last chance to see it all."

“One...last?”

Luna bowed her head, eyes wet, tears glistening like diamonds as they fell to the ground, “When I gave you that start,” she whispered, “I gave you a stop. It was your heart, Fluttershy, it gave in. It stopped.”

“Then...what? How?”

“Look around, Fluttershy, look at yourself. You're a wisp, a spirit-pony – freed by my magic for this one last trip to the places that you love before I send you on your final journey.”

“Another journey?” Fluttershy looked up.

They always looked up, mused Luna proudly, as if they knew, “Indeed. Home. It's time to go home, Fluttershy.”

Fluttershy looked down at her hooves, spread out her wings, eyed the tint of moonlight and stars that she now realized she could see through them, and shook her head, “No.”

“No?” Luna looked up, a strange expression playing on her muzzle.

“No, not yet. Use your magic, you have great magic! I don't want to go yet. I *am* home!”

“You want to stay here?”

Fluttershy nodded, and danced, pirouetting through the air, her wings flashing and hooves spinning, young again – young, wild and free, “I want to say goodbye properly.”

“They'll never see you, they can't.”

“I don't mind,” Fluttershy laughed, “I never was loud and boisterous like Rainbow Dash, or the centre of attention at parties like Rarity or Pinkie. Give me this, Luna, please?”

Luna bowed her head, deep in thought, “Okay, alright. I will give you a day.”

Fluttershy danced around Luna, her ethereal body springing lightly from hoof to hoof, step to step, “It will be enough.”

In the moonlight, the indistinct form bent down to pick up an even less distinct form – there was a suggestion of ears, a hint of paws, a touch of a poofy little tail. The two embraced.

The ghostly form of the spirit-pegasus bounded away, no longer held down by age or weakness, no longer shackled by pain, no more earth-bound with fear. She was free, free to dance and sing and twirl across the beautiful vistas, her song playing in every blade of grass her laughter in every waterfall and her footsteps and wing-beats echoing with every woodland creature.

Luna raised her head, a smile playing across her features as she took to the skies, turning to smoke and evaporating towards the rising sun, her task complete, “I give you a day, dear Fluttershy. A day for every life you touched. A day for every song you sung and a day for every pony who loves you, May you dance for as long as they speak your name.”

Feather Blossom trotted up the path happily. She was going to see her great-aunt Fluttershy! She was late, but she knew the old mare wouldn't mind, she'd be there with a smile and a cup of tea...

She stopped short.

The door to Fluttershy's cottage was open and a still, cold form lay in the doorway. The top half of the door had been shut but the rabbits had been unable to pull their mistress back inside. The clouds closed in over Feather Blossom's head as she took the last few steps to the gate.

It started to rain, but Feather's cheeks were already wet before the first drops touched the earth.

Little baby bunnies were clustered sadly around Fluttershy's unresponsive muzzle, a plate of the finest greens set out before her, gingerly trying to get her to eat them, nuzzling and nudging her, urging her to wake and greet them with a kiss like she always did. But she wouldn't. Ever again.

Feather Blossom shooed them away gently, “She...” her voice cracked, “She's sleeping. Let her sleep.”

The golden-and-cream pegasus bent down and with a deft hoof closed Fluttershy's unseeing eyes and kissed her forehead between the ears. The Angel looked on, unsure but approving.

Feather Blossom remembered, and with a deep breath realized the task would fall to her now, "Angel? You're the Angel? You hold down the fort, I'll be back in a while. I...I need to get help, help for Fluttershy, okay? Be my big brave bunny now."

Feather Blossom bent her head and kissed the rabbit softly. The rabbit saluted, and then set about cleaning up the cottage. He would miss Fluttershy, he loved her like no other, but there was a new mistress now. She would want things to be done right by the old mare.

The wind whipped cruelly around the solemn procession of ponies as they walked resolutely up the mountain. So many years before, some of them had done the self-same trek as they sought to rid Equestria of a sleeping, snoring dragon. It had been Fluttershy that had vanquished the beast – with kindness. It was only fitting she be laid to rest here.

Big Mac pulled the wagon. He was old, but still strong. Two of his nephews flanked him in case he faltered. He knew he wouldn't, not in this task. Twilight and Applejack – his wife and sister – followed behind, with Morning Sparkle behind them. Pinkie bounced – solemnly somehow – next to him. She had flown in specially by chariot, no expense spared.

The procession rounded the final bend and the dragon's cave was ahead of them. It was empty now, as it had been ever since that fateful day.

"We gonna put her in there?" asked Big Mac, pointing a hoof.

"Not quite," said Twilight, "according to her diary there's a path somewhere around here....ah!"

Twilight led the way – there was a small path behind some scrub bushes. It was slow going, and the apple-twins had to help push a couple of times, but they cleared it.

The rocky vista gave way, all of a sudden, to a green and verdant meadow. Secluded at the very top of Dragon Mountain – called by most inhabitants of Ponyville “Fluttershy's Peak” - was a veritable miniature paradise. The sun shone brightly and the wintry cold air was a distant memory.

“My stars, Twilight, to think this was here all this time!”

“Beautiful, isn't it?” said Twilight, “I...I read her diary, afterwards. She wrote in it what she wanted to...to happen.”

The unicorn stopped, squeezing her eyes shut, to be comforted by her family and friends. They all grouped together for a moment, before setting about their allotted tasks. The way was prepared, the tomb was built – Morning lifted the rocks using his magic and then, gently, reverently, lifted Fluttershy's remains into position before settling the urn of her beloved long-departed Angel to be nestled forever more in her hooves. Casting another spell, he set about covering the pair up and creating a protection spell that would last for decades. The cairn would be a monument to a pony who had, in her own small quiet way, touched the lives of thousands.

“I approve,” said Twilight, “I know she would. This meadow, this secret place of sunlight and the full might and majesty of nature's glory - it's perfect. Her final resting place.”

They stood there for a moment, solemn and silent, paying their last respects before they turned as one to look back down the mountain towards their home.

“Who would have thought,” said Morning brightly, “something so lovely as this, so remote...”

“It suits her, Twi.” said Applejack.

“Eeeyup.” said Big Mac, bending down to kiss the purple unicorn and his orange earth-pony sister on their foreheads.

“It's her.” whispered Twilight, nodding to herself, as with a sudden flutter of wings that hummed a sweet tune speaking of friendship and magic, thousands of butterflies flooded through the meadow and danced in the summery breeze.

The Fourth Gem

“Oh my my, everything is shaping up just *wonderfully* my dears! For my final appearance as head of House Rarity before you three take up the reigns and I...retire, everything must be perfect! Amethyst, *do* make sure the lighting crew are prepared - double check all the lights!” said Rarity in a sing-song voice.

“At once Mama!” replied Amethyst curtly, bowing her head with a small smile playing on her lips. Her mother trotted past frantically, adjusting a hemline here and dabbing a spot of blusher there on the fortunate lost souls who wandered within reach of the old unicorn’s magic. The prim and proper white unicorn was gifted with a still-stunning purple mane and tail despite her advanced age.

“Ruby, Ruby! Make doubly sure all the models are ready and waiting! Those with dresses to finish-” called Rarity, voice breaking with stress as she flustered and panicked.

“Yes mama!” interrupted Ruby, “Those with dresses to finish should be in dressing room B, makeup in dressing room C, finishing touches in A - calm yourself mother, be calm! We three have everything well in hoof here and Jewel is putting the finishing touches to the dresses.”

“For an earth pony,” mullered Amethyst, “I did wonder why you brought her in and gave her the spot you did, with no magic and only hooves for such intricate work...”

“Ammy! Second-guessing mother like that!” gasped Ruby.

“I was *about to say*,” continued Amethyst, sticking a tongue out, “that whilst I *didn’t* understand, I do *now*. I don’t know *where* you found her but she’s saved our hides more than once. I swear, if I didn’t know better she could almost be...”

“Well I don’t know *what* I would do without you three either deary!” Rarity interrupted as she trotted back past and gave her second daughter a peck on the cheek, trembling as she mentally ticked off yet another item to deal with, “Oh! Music! Music! We must have-”

“Music is ready, mama,” said Emerald, the third daughter, with a laugh. “We have The Hoof to open with, Three Foals Black for the evening wear, the Colt Cuddlers,” she giggled despite herself at the name, “for the lingerie and Stomp Stomp Whinny for the ensemble pieces. I can assure you, *no pony* has seen an eclectic collection like these ever. You’ll be the talk of Equestria for *decades* mama! You will go out in style!”

“Oh, I don’t know...do you really think the Colt Cuddlers..?” Rarity fussed over the music choice, her aged voice quivering as she considered the possible backlash.

“Oh it must be *bold*! You said so yourself! When have I ever steered you wrong?” asked Emerald, her name reflecting her colour-scheme perfectly.

Rarity paused, forehoof half in the air. She blushed, “Oh my dear daughters, *never*. Mama is so proud, of all of you! If only...” she sniffed, sadly, raising a kerchief to her eye, “if only Starlight could see you now. Oh I miss him. His calm disposition, soft voice. Those big, *strong* hooves...”

“Mother!” gasped Amethyst, flicking her tail.

“Starlight Express, I used to call him...oh your father and I had such *good* times...”

“Not listening!” cried the purple unicorn with dazzling white mane, closing her eyes and throwing her head back as she started singing, “la la la laaaa!”

“Oh Ammy,” chided Ruby, shaking her deep-red statuesque head in a laugh, “a grown mare like you! You’ve got foals of your own!”

“It’s just it’s *different* when it’s Mother talking about...*it*.”

“You’re such a prude!” giggled Emerald, putting a hoof to her muzzle, “Why, with the things I read about you in Equestria Daily...”

Emerald trailed off as she turned to see her aged mother sprawled on her backside with a faraway expression in her eyes, “Girls! Mama’s not well!”

The three older daughters crowded around their mother as Emerald leaned in and nuzzled her ears, “Mother? Mother! Are you alright?”

Rarity blinked and shook her head, "Oh, darlings, of course mama's alright!"

"When did you last *rest* Mama?" chided Ruby, "We have everything well in hoof! You're running yourself ragged like this! Tell me, when did you last get some shut-eye?"

"I simply *don't* know what you're talking about, Ruby darling. Why I'm perfectly..." Rarity surged to her hooves and stood there, swaying gently for a moment before collecting herself, "I'm perfectly fine!"

"You're not! You're going to kill yourself if you don't get some rest. I don't know *where* you found her but she really *is* a gem - Go! Go see Jewel. She's putting the finishing touches to our top models and I know for a fact she's been sleeping in there, slaving away, getting your collection ready. There's a bed of sorts in there, *use it*. You may inspect the rest of our girls when you've rested up."

"But..." said Rarity, glancing towards the door marked with three large diamonds. In truth, she'd been agonizing over a decision that had long been put off - facing Jewel would mean facing that decision once and for all.

"But nothing! Go!" said Ruby, pointing with a hoof. The deep red unicorn breathed a deep sigh, "Please?"

"Oh alright, for you, but I don't know what the fuss is about..."

Jewel was an earth pony, so unlike Rarity and her three famous daughters, she had to use her mouth and hooves to maneuver fabrics into position and sew sequins and buttons. Still, she was the quiet powerhouse behind many of House Rarity's top-selling outfits. She sat engrossed in her task, sewing machine humming away, as Rarity walked up behind her and stood, watching.

Jewel stopped and lifted her head suddenly, turning, "Oh! Miss Rarity! I didn't see you there! Forgive me!" she fumbled with her gear and awkwardly stood up on all four hooves to give a cautious curtsy.

“Oh don’t get up my dear, I’m...I’m a silly old mare and I’m just getting in the way but...I love to see you work.” Rarity stumbled a bit and almost fell. Jewel leaped to prop her up and lead her to a large comfortable couch. Rarity looked deeply into her eyes, breathing deeply, as if searching for something...or trying to speak.

“Up you get, Miss Rarity, right here.” said Jewel softly, nudging the aged unicorn mare with her muzzle, “lay yourself down for a bit. Is there anything I can get you? Is there anything specific you want?”

For a moment, it seemed as if the unicorn was about the speak, as if a heavy weight rested upon her back and she just waited to unburden herself - but the moment passed, “Just...just a glass of water, if you will - and tell me, how is your dress coming along?”

Jewel stiffened, halfway to the well-stocked fridge. Nervously putting the crystal goblet down, she pulled open the door and lifted out a bottle of sparkling mineral water in silence.

“Jewel, darling, you can’t hide anything from...from Rarity. I know you’ve been working on your own creation, something uniquely *you*.”

“It’s not finished,” said Jewel in a small voice, picking up the now-filled glass carefully and bringing it back to Rarity, who used her magic to take it from her. The unicorn’s magic faltered for a moment and the goblet dipped, but she recovered and sipped it gratefully.

“Then finish it, display it, show me! Shower me with your brilliance.” Rarity leaned back in the sofa. Whatever she’d had in mind to speak about, decided Jewel, the unicorn had put it off once again.

Jewel blinked and shook her head, there wasn’t a hint of irony in the mare’s lined muzzle about the dress and the old mare was urging her on to work. She dipped her head demurely and moved back to the sewing machine. As the clatter started up again, she could feel Rarity’s eyes boring into the back of her skull. Jewel *knew* she had something important to say, but it was as if the unicorn just didn’t know how to start. She sighed, a practiced eye sweeping across her dress as she completed it’s silken lengths and frilly folds in her mind. It was time to spread her wings.

Rarity opened her eyes with a start, had she been...sleeping? Worse, she'd been drooling. Somepony had pulled a blanket over her. How long had she been out? Glancing at the clock she all but leaped from her makeshift bed to stand on wobbly legs from the sudden exertion, "Oh no! It's time! I'm late! There's just so much to do! So much...I wanted to say."

In an echo to her words, the door to the room burst open and Rarity's three unicorn daughters exploded in, chattering and hollering.

"It's the final act! We're supposed to be on stage! The big number is supposed to start in ten minutes and our light technician's had a blackout!"

"The Colt Cuddlers are off *Colt Cuddling*! And Stomp Stomp Whinny's having a tantrum!"

"By Celestia's great blue beard! Tell me at least our *models* are ready!"

"Thanks to Jewel," said Ruby demurely, "they were and are. Now, get Candlewick if you can't get Nightlight and let's get the closing number of this show on the road!"

Rarity leaped to the door and closed it quickly, "No!"

She had come to a decision.

She bit her lip, "No, first I...I have something to tell you all. An announcement, it can't wait. I've waited too long already - the show will go on but...this can't wait!"

"Mother?" asked Amethyst quizzically.

"Many years ago I met your father, girls. He was a good stallion and he was taken *far* too quickly. The best medicine in Equestria couldn't save him, and..." she paused, wiping a tear from her eye, "and I missed him so much, but we grew. We lived. We survived."

"We all miss Papa *very* much," said Ruby, "but is now the best time to get maudlin over him?"

"Shush Ruby! This isn't about your father. It's about what happened next. A few years after his passing I found myself back in Ponyville, renovating and re-opening Carousel Boutique. There was...we needed

wood. My good friend Applejack had an orchard, and trees she didn't want. I found a helpful stallion to rebuild."

"Yes, we know. It's when you...went into seclusion. We thought that was because you missed Papa."

"Oh girls," Rarity smiled fondly, "you shone brighter that day than any star. You took my little company and made it something great whilst I was holed up in the back of beyond feeling sorry for myself."

"So you *were* moping." giggled Emerald.

"I was *not* moping. I was *pinning*. There's a difference," sniffed Rarity, "anyway, there I was...and there *he* was."

"HE?" echoed all three daughters.

"What does this...I'll...just be going..."

"You most certainly will *not*, Jewel, this involves you too. Sit. That stallion, young Caramel by name, caught my eye and we got to...talking. And soon talking turned to something more and then...well, Jewel, I have something to say to you that I should have said *years* ago."

"Mother!" cried Amethyst, "You *didn't*?"

"I did. Several times. Many times. Eleven months later, Jewel was born."

You could have heard a pin drop, thought Jewel. She flinched a moment later when an entire box of pins clattered to the polished oaken floor as one of the elder sisters, one of *her* sisters realised Jewel, stumbled into it in shock. The room exploded again, into a ceaseless jumble of chatter.

"How could you not tell us?"

"How could you manage to hide it!"

"So...who brought her up?"

Rarity fended them off, "One at a time, one at a time. I operated Carousel Boutique alone and young Jewel stayed with the Apple family. I...I

had my reputation to uphold - hear me out; back then a foal born out of wedlock was a scandal, it took Ditzzy *years* to get over Dinky. It would have ruined me, ruined my business and ruined any future for *you*, my poor darling Jewel..." Rarity turned back to her eldest daughters and continued, "so she had to grow up without a mother...without her sisters."

"Applejack said one of her long lost relatives *died* in the Everfree Forest and she could only save *me!*" shouted Jewel, stomping a hoof, "I cried myself to sleep when she told me that!"

"Applejack's and my friendship suffered quite the strain and we didn't speak for a long time, but she did what she thought was best when I asked her, when I explained. She forgave me eventually. Can you?" asked Rarity in a small voice when she finally plucked up the courage to lift her head and meet Jewel's gaze, "I'm a vain old mare; a stupid, vain, selfish old mare and I cared more for my name and my prestige than for my own daughter..."

Jewel sniffed, gulping back tears, "But it was you who...always bought me new dresses and ribbons and saddles, even though they weren't always the most practical for a farm-pony."

Rarity nodded, wordlessly.

"It was you, then, who paid the tuition fees when I got into Hoity Toity's School of the Gifted Arts." she looked up into Rarity's reflective blue eyes, her troubled expression lifting slightly.

"I did."

"It was you who gave me my first break, wasn't it?"

"I...called in a few favours, but...your talent...that wasn't..."

"I inherited it from you though, didn't I? You didn't abandon me...You watched over me."

Rarity nodded slowly, tears forming in her eyes, "I watched you for so long, from afar. I daren't hold you. I daren't tell you...and then...and then you were all grown up!"

Jewel watched wordlessly as the usually verbose unicorn choked up and resorted to gesticulating, panting hard between sobs, talking about

missing her first steps and aching every time she cut her knees and had cried for mommy...and gone to be comforted by Applejack. About not being able to congratulate good grades and share triumphs and comfort failures...but most of all, on Dam's Days, she'd missed the scrolls. A simple scroll, hoof made with love would have been her fondest wish. Applejack had saved them all. They all featured the stetson-hatted cow-pony. Big Mac featured in Sire's Day scrolls.

Rarity's eyes grew puffy, "I...did what I could...but the simplest thing that I *should* have done was just to scoop you up in my hooves and tell you the truth! And I never did! I wasted all these years...now, when I have no time left..."

"Mother!" retorted Ruby, "Don't speak like that!"

"Hush girls, it's alright. A unicorn like myself...when you get to my age you get an inkling of what time you have left and mine grows short-" A bell sounded, curtain call for the final act and the unveiling of the ponies behind House Rarity, "...and now we have no time left. I know this is sudden. I know this is a shock...I've been meaning to tell you. For so many years! After the show, dearest Jewel, you and I...shall have a long talk. Yes. A holiday. We'll...we'll start anew. Fresh. I...I can never get those years back but hopefully you can learn to forgive..."

"Rar- ...Mother," Jewel tasted the unfamiliar word in her mouth, interrupting the nervous monologue, "I...understand *what* you did, I'm not ever sure I'll quite understand *why*, but I'm a grown filly. A few years ago I would have thrown things, bucked doors off hinges...but now? ...Can we hug? We have time for a hug, don't we?"

Rarity's face broke into a wide smile, "Of course we can. Of course!"

They embraced, neck to neck, and the moment stretched on for as long as it could. Jewel opened her eyes as she felt hot tears on her neck, tears of regret.

"*I wasted so much time,*" whispered Rarity, "I can't tell you how much it hurt me. I have no idea how much it must hurt *you*! I must make it right. Tonight, to the world, I will present my youngest daughter, prize of my collection, source of so much secret joy, now to be made public. Put your dress on dear, we have a show to present!"

“But...my dress! It’s...it’s missing something! I don’t know what though!” Jewel almost laughed at herself, fussing over a mere dress when her life had just been turned upside down.

“I have *just* the thing. Put the dress on and wait right here!”

As Jewel shrugged into her creation, Rarity galloped off, reappearing a few minutes later with an ornate box marked with a silver-inlaid ‘R’. The unicorn opened it. Inside, glittering on black velvet, was a necklace. Rarity lifted it out with her magic and fastened it to the earth-pony where it flashed brightly, the hue of the gem changing to match Jewel’s cutie-mark.

Jewel didn’t even have a chance to admire it before she was dragged pell-mell through the complex, “Perfect! Now, to the center dais!”

Rarity and Jewel fairly flashed through the crowd of panicked workers that scurried about lifting curtains and adjusting pedestals, and all but leaped onto the biggest. The lights went out, the music started, and Rarity’s show went into action.

Rarity turned to her daughter, “Jewel...I...I just want to say, whilst I still can, that I love you. I’ve always loved you. I only wanted the best for you.”

“I know Rar- mother, I know...but the show..?”

“That doesn’t matter so much than that I...get to tell you. Whatever happens, know I gave you everything I could.”

“Why are you now..?”

“I’m a unicorn with not much time left, Jewel, I can hear the stars calling my name. This will be my last performance, and your first. Please remember,” Rarity took a deep breath, turning to face the crowd, tears squeezing out of her tightly-clenched eyes, “please remember I love you. Whatever happens, *it’s not your fault.*”

“I don’t understand!” wailed Jewel.

“You will, dear Jewel, you will. Now, chin up! Face forward. Chest in! Smile!”

Spike cleared his throat as he spoke into the microphone, "Through the years...none have done more for fashion, none have been more bold or unique, none have been as talented in their endeavours as the members of House Rarity. Tonight, it is my great pleasure to present to you the three princesses of pret-a-porter, Ruby, Emerald and Amethyst!"

At his words, the platforms lifted silently into the air. Panicked squeals and hissed protests reached Rarity's ears, "Lights! We have no lights!"

"Then," said Rarity, "I shall produce the lights! The show must go on!"

Rarity closed her eyes, and her horn sparked into glory. Above the stage, lights flickered on and shone with soft yet powerful multi-coloured lights. Rarity groaned under the strain, falling back to her haunches.

"Mother - Mama! You don't need to do this!"

"It's...alright...mother's fine..." said Rarity through gritted teeth, getting back to her hooves, as stars exploded in her vision, "I can handle it..."

The lights lit up the three expertly placed unicorns. The roar of the crowd - previously tumultuous - raised to bedlam levels. Beneath the stage there came the snapping of ropes.

"*Rarity has it in hoof!*" shouted the unicorn, compensating with her magic as various mechanisms suddenly refused to work.

"Mama! Please!" said Jewel.

"The show! Must! Go! On!" panted Rarity, "No pony knows the setup as well as I do! Just a few more...minutes..."

"Please stop! Others can handle it! Oh *why* must you be so stubborn?"

"*No!* The world must know! *Be ready!*"

Rarity panted - demurely - as the dais rose into the sky. All around her she could feel the sound of the crowd stomping their hooves, calling her name. The blood rushed through her head as she exercised her magic to make this one night, this one last performance before *all* her daughters took over, *fabulous*. It was her way. It was her dream. Self-made. Self-reliant. She would do as she must, as she always had.

“But tonight,” said Spike into the microphone, his voice reverberating across the open-air auditorium, “House Rarity has something more to tell you. Something more to present. Something extraordinary.”

The dragon hesitated, eyes going wide at what he was reading, “House Rarity is blessed with three truly talented unicorn daughters, each one their mother’s equal...but tonight, tonight House Rarity is joined by a fourth. I present, with great fanfare, the...the youngest daughter of Madame Rarity - *Jewel*.”

Rarity took a deep breath. This was it. Her daughter’s moment. The *one* chance she would have to redeem herself to her youngest offspring. She leaned into the magic. She poured her very heart and her soul into the spells that fizzled and crackled across the brightly-lit stage. The blood rushing through her ears was loud, so loud it drowned out the pandemonium that overtook the audience as every single member stood up to look up at the radiant beauty that was this sudden, unexpected and magnificent filly. Her dress shone like the moon, drifted like the wind, sparkled like the stars...indeed, the stars themselves seemed to shine with a greater light than ever before in answer. Rarity breathed deeply - once, twice - and released the last of her magic.

Overhead, as the two unicorns center stage rose into view, the night sky exploded with a shimmering, multi-coloured rainbow of starlight. A rushing clap of thunder tore the very heavens asunder as light brighter than the day rippled across the expansive panorama. The lights on the gantrys exploded with showers of sparks, and the stage - save for Jewel and her mother - was plunged into darkness.

The crowd was silent...and then it burst into applause more powerful than before.

In the midst of all this, Jewel turned to Rarity, who seemed to be asleep. Her eyes were closed and her horn was dark. She was very still, peaceful. Jewel bent her head to nuzzle softly at the mistress of elegance, and started to cry, softly, as the world slowly realized that the guiding star of fashion itself...had gone out.

“Oh mother,” said Jewel, nuzzling softly as tears rolled down her cheeks, “still giving of yourself to others to the very end, even if you had to do things your own way. Thank you. I love you. I’ll miss you.”

Celestia watched from her private box, and she turned to Luna, “Was that...you?”

“I control the night sky, dear sister, and whilst I admit to knowing the timing of such oddities of the universe as *supernovae*, sometimes these things just...happen.”

Celestia smiled, she didn't believe a word of it, “She deserved the send-off, little sister.”

Luna watched on, eyes twinkling like the stars that were slowly reappearing as the last remaining rays of the monumental burst of light faded. They illuminated the scene of four solemn ponies kneeling around the still form of Rarity, proud and beautiful even to the end.

“She did indeed. I'd burn a thousand stars for a mare such as Rarity, and still they wouldn't eclipse her light.”

Party On

The birthday party at Canterlot Castle was in full swing; the chandeliers were bedecked in a multitude of streamers, disco balls glittered and shone in the arclight. Loud music thumped rhythmically throughout the ballroom and confetti was strewn haphazardly amongst the balloons and other decorations. The ballroom, and especially the dance floor, was packed wall to wall with ponies, griffons, dragons... and snacks. Lots and lots of snacks.

Through it all, hopping on four pastel pink hooves, was a pastel pink pony. A *very* pastel pink pony. She bounced gaily, almost dancing amongst the party goers as she went about her way, missing them by mere inches, ducking under tails and whipping past wings. Her movements were spritely and she giggled excitedly with glee, but it was punctuated with an occasional wheezing cough. Every few hops, Pinkie had to stop, straighten one hoof, and take a deep breath before moving on.

“Mama Pie, please stop bouncing everywhere!” cried an exasperated red-and-white striped mare that attempted to keep up with her mother. The candy cane coloured pony with a similarly coloured mane and tail found herself altogether unable to keep up. She repeatedly ran into guests, careened off the tables and burst balloons wherever she went. Finally she caught up with her errant parent, mane coming to a stop moments after the rest of her body with a barely-constrained and angry flounce, “You’ll break something if you carry on like this! A leg, a hip, your ribs... and *then* where will you be?”

“Oh Candy Swirl, you know me, I’ll stop bouncing when I stop moving! I can’t *walk* when there’s a party to be had!”

“*Which*,” snapped Candy, “I wish you’d have left to *me*.”

This made Pinkie Pie stop mid-bounce. She paused in the air and deflated like a balloon, her poofy pink hair deflating into sullen locks. She dropped to the floor and landed lightly, despite her age. Candy blinked, such a momentum-defying move had to be a trick of the light.

“Candy, you... don’t like my parties?”

“Oh, Mama, *no*, no. I love your parties. You throw the *best* parties, you always have! But... aren't you a bit old for all this nonsense now?”

“Nonsense?” Pinkie clip-clopped a few steps towards her daughter apprehensively, the look on her face tragic and shocked, “Nonsense? You're calling my parties nonsense?”

Candy regretted it, but she frowned and continued, “Mama dearest, I... just want you to be hap—”

Fanfare stopped Candy mid-exclamation as the great double-doors to the royal ballroom were thrown open and a procession of heralds filed in. There was more fanfare, and the heralds called out, “HEAR YE, HEAR YE! MAKE WAY FOR HER MOST GLORIOUS HIGHNESS, PRINCESS CELESTIA OF EQUESTRIA! BRINGER OF THE SUN, RULER OF THE DAY, REGENT OF LIGHTS...”

The exultations to Celestia carried on, but Candy was no longer listening. Her eyes uncrossed as she got used to the sudden increase in volume and she shook her head, preparing to carry on lecturing her mother. Candy hadn't thought it possible for the party to get any louder, but she was wrong. She cleared her head with a shake and turned back to her mother. “I just want you to be happy, Mama... Mama?”

Pinkie had vanished.

Candy scowled again. The matriarch of the Ponyville branch of the Pie family, purveyor of the finest parties anywhere in Equestria and grand old dame of Pinkie Pie's Party-tacular Party Emporium, *the* single biggest jokes and entertainment mega-shop in all the lands, was a sneaky, conniving, slippery old baggage. Whilst Candy loved her mother dearly, it infuriated her no end that Pinkie refused to act her age or her station.

There was another fanfare as Celestia took her place in the center of the room, a glowing warm light upon her.

The heralds started up again, “AND NOW, ASSEMBLED GUESTS, LOYAL SUBJECTS, FRIENDS, IT IS TIME TO GREET LUNA, GUARDIAN OF THE GREATER DEEPS, BRINGER OF THE MOON, RULER OF THE NIGHT, REGENT OF THE NIGHT SKIES ON THIS, THE MOST AUSPICIOUS DAY OF HER BIRTH!”

Candy's head rang again at the renewed and redoubled burst of volume. The French windows across the other side of the room were flung open. On mighty wings, in sailed a dark blue alicorn bedecked in a petite crown, her starlit mane swirling as she passed. Behind Princess Luna, the night sky lit up with a thousand fireworks to punctuate her already grand entrance. Candy shook her head in renewed wonder. Pinkie Pie, the famous Bearer of the Element of Laughter, certainly *did* know how to throw a party.

The fact her mother was missing the big moment, realised Candy, could mean only *one* thing: trouble.

Pinkie Pie sneaked around. She didn't creep about like a thief in the night, oh no. Pinkie was a master of stealth. She strode boldly through the castle and yet remained completely unnoticed. She turned left into a hallway and through a door just as a pegasus guard trotted past. She reappeared a minute later, further down, appearing from a cupboard. *I still got it*, she thought to herself, *I'm still Equestria's number one hide and seek champ!*

There was a tug on her tail.

"Granny Pie?"

Pinkie stopped, and turned her head, "Fizzy Pop? How did you get there?"

"I just followed you, Granny!"

Pinkie blinked, her hair poofed up slightly from its recent deflating. "You followed me? *Everywhere?*" she asked.

Fizzy Pop nodded, the lavender pony bouncing up and down with joy, "I even went through the dresser!"

"Show me," said Pinkie, her eyes shining as she regained the spring in her step, "right now!"

Fizzy Pop shrank back. "Bu-but Mama said..."

Pinkie looked left, and then right, "I don't see Mama here right now... go see if she's further up, like in that suit of armor!"

"In the suit of armor? Won't that be a bit loud?"

"Don't make it fall over then!" giggled Pinkie Pie as she trotted happily down the corridor. She watched as Fizzy Pop dived back into the cupboard, closing the door behind her. Pinkie Pie raised an eyebrow and turned to the suit of armor, which now had a little lavender pony peering out of it.

"Did I do good, Granny?" asked Fizzy, pulling herself out exceedingly carefully.

Pinkie scrunched up her face, leaping into the air with an exclamation of joy. "Ooh," said Pinkie, stretching, "that's getting harder every day. Come on, we're almost there."

"Where are we going, Granny?"

"See those fireworks?" Pinkie asked, pointing an aged hoof at the window, where bursts of light could be seen lighting the skies. The pops and explosions were faint, but audible. Fizzy Pop nodded.

Pinkie smiled approvingly, "Well they're going to need some help if they're going to be really noticed, so you and I are sneaking into the old abandoned North tower to set up phase two of my super specially awesome explosion-tacular party display."

"Th-the North tower? But... but that's where Celestia keeps all the ghosties and ghoulies and long-legged beasties!" Fizzy Pop looked up with a worried expression on her face.

"Bah, you're not afraid of ghosts, are you?" asked Pinkie as she lead the way. She glanced down at the little filly, who nodded. Pinkie stopped and took a deep breath, "You silly filly, when I was about your age, *my* grandma told me what I'm about to tell you: hiding under your pillow in the dead of night isn't the way to deal with ghosts. At all."

"It's not?" asked the small voice of Fizzy Pop.

Pinkie shook her head, "No, it's not. You've got to face your fears, Fizzy. You've got to stand up tall! You just turn around, stand up straight, look them mean ghosties in the eye and you know what?"

Fizzy shook her head. All of a sudden Pinkie burst out laughing, "You've got to laugh! Just laugh! Laugh to make them disappear! Ha ha ha!"

Fizzy giggled to herself. It was hard not to with Pinkie making silly faces with each 'ha'.

"Give me your best laugh, Fizzy!"

Fizzy scrunched up her face, took a deep breath, and let it out. A tiny squeak of a "ha" escaped her lips. Pinkie stopped, looked down at Fizzy and for a moment was utterly silent... and then Pinkie burst out in huge guffaws. Fizzy Pop reddened, and then started laughing too. Finally she realised that Pinkie had stopped and the only sound was her merry chuckling filling the tower.

"Doesn't feel so scary any more, does it, huh?"

Fizzy shook her head, all smiles.

Pinkie nuzzled the poofy curls affectionately, "You're a Pie, Fizzy. Fizzy Pop Pie. I wonder what a fizzy pop pie would taste like?"

Fizzy Pop bounced like Pinkie as they both ascended the staircase. "Cotton candy?"

"I *love* cotton candy! Maybe toffee apples? Those things are *good*. You like them too? What other treats doesn't your mama let you have too much of? What do you like?"

Fizzy thought for a moment before lifting her gaze, "I know! My favourite is soda."

"Why's that?"

"Cause I can burp the entire alphabet when I drink enough of it, but Mama says I shouldn't."

"Oooh, don't let your mama tell you to stop! Burping the alphabet could be *really* important one day!"

"It could?" asked Fizzy, eyes shining.

“Uh huh,” Pinkie nudged open a door and trotted in, “I’m not sure how, but one day... there you’ll be! And only a burp will save the day!”

The room at the top of the castle tower would have been spacious, but it was filled to the brim with boxes upon boxes of fireworks. Fizzy had seen even more piles of fireworks down below as they’d ascended. Granny *Pinkie sure does have a lot of fireworks*, thought Fizzy.

Pinkie ignored the boxes and barrels and trotted over to the window. “About time,” she said to herself, before turning back to Fizzy Pop, “Now Fizzy, you’ve got to listen to me. I’m going to need to know if you’re ready for the greatest prank *ever*. It’s going to be dangerous, there’s going to be *lots* of shouting and yelling and you’re probably going to be grounded for a *month*!”

“A whole month?” Fizzy was aghast. “What am I going to do?”

Pinkie grinned, her whole body quivering. “It’s not what you’re going to do, it’s what *I’m* going to do! It’s all set up! The timer fuse, the fireworks, the powder kegs, the guards aaannnddd.... the rope ladder!”

“The what, the what and the what? Why’d you need all that, *and* fireworks?”

Pinkie rolled her eyes, giving a wheezing laugh. “What do you normally do with fireworks? They go boom! Listen to me: fireworks are dangerous, so you’re going to have to listen to me *very* carefully. I want you to climb out that window and down the rope ladder, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Scoot! Go! Vamoose!”

“But what about you?”

Pinkie struck a hoof on the stone floor. A spark leapt onto a nearby pile of black powder, which started burning vigorously. Within it were sunk many, many threads, the ends of which sparked into flame. “I,” Pinkie replied, “am going to be right behind you! Let’s hustle!”

Pinkie Pie gathered up her grand-daughter in her mouth and all but leaped out of the window. She swung a hoof around the rope ladder and slowly began navigating it down towards the ground. Up above, there was

a sudden flare of bright green light. Pinkie said something which Fizzy knew as Number Sixteen on The List of Bad Words that Mama had said Should Not Be Spoken.

“What’s wrong?” asked Fizzy in a worried voice.

“Somepony messed up my timer, that’s what! Fizzy, can you swim?”

“What?”

“Can you swim? I know you come to my pool parties every summer and I’ve seen you with your swim-ring, but can you swim?”

“Er, yeah! I’m pretty good! I got my silver swimming medal only last we—”

“Good. Hold your breath!” Pinkie tossed the filly in the air and caught her in a better position, and then flipped her own body around. Moments later, she was no longer clambering down the rope ladder. Instead, she was *galloping* directly down the tower wall itself. Fizzy screamed long and loud as the ground approached at breakneck speed. Above them, a yellow explosion blew the window frame out. Rubble rained out into the lake which lay below the North Tower.

“Fizzy!” shouted Pinkie, her voice muffled. “Good luck!”

Pinkie slammed all four hooves into the tower. It shook with the impact of the earth pony’s limbs as she bounced off the structure and out into the night. Up above, a red light flared. The final signal. It didn’t dim like the others. Instead, it grew brighter and brighter, and brighter.

The explosion, when it came, was monumental. The shockwave shattered the glass windows of the ballroom and blew out every single last candle on the candelabras. Through the now-empty frames, the panicked crowd witnessed a spectacle the likes of which they would probably never, ever, see again. The North Tower, flames shooting from its base and windows, lifted ever so slowly into the air and rose faster and faster and faster until it all but disappeared into the heavens.

There was another explosion. It knocked the crowd flat as the night sky lit up like the day in a final cataclysmic burst. The spectacle was seen,

it was later said, as far away as the draconic realms and the other side of the endless desert. Pegasus guards stormed on the scene, the royal unicorn guard contingents raised magical shields which had only twice ever before in written memory been raised, and the war ministry - staffed in its entirety by a single lone earth pony who slept through the whole thing - was notified by a memo of the possible invasion.

Amidst the explosions and massive fireball, glowing hot chunks of masonry rained from the skies for several minutes. They sparked as they struck the nearly invisible shield-bubble, sliding slowly and safely to the ground, where they were funnelled to reinforce a struggling dam several miles down the mountain.

As Equestria prepared itself for war, one mare was already on the warpath. There was only *one* thought in the mind of Candy Swirl, and that was *Pinkie Pie*.

Fizzy Pop crawled, coughing and shivering, out of the lake. She looked up at the massive fireball that was, even now, still spreading across the sky as showers of sparks flickered overhead. She blinked, unmoving. A bedraggled pink pony likewise crawled out of the dark waters, hiccuping.

"That," said Fizzy Pop, "was *insane*."

"I'll apologize to your Mama in the morning. If she'll still talk to me."

"Can we do it again?"

Pinkie turned her head to look at the diminutive little four-hooved terror and started laughing. She winced as the coughing turned to splutters and a hacking cough that took several seconds to abate, "You really are a Pie."

"And you," said a male voice, as a whole platoon of pegasus guards landed on the shore, "are under arrest."

Fizzy Pop shrunk inside herself as she and Granny Pie were escorted through the grounds of Canterlot Castle. The darkness had returned by now, but the after-effects were still being felt. A myriad of tiny fires were

raging on the blackened island that had previously held the old stone tower. A squadron of unicorns with an affinity for water had been dispatched and had everything under control. The majority of the rubble had been dealt with, but little pieces were being picked out of rooftops and walls for miles around.

There was lots of shouting, stomping of hooves and angry glares, but worst of all was Mama Swirl's expression. The night was cold and the water in Fizzy's fur had left her chilled, but Mama's scowl left her colder still.

Through it all moved Pinkie, flanked by pegasus guards on either side and followed by Fizzy Pop. Pinkie giggled to herself softly, but winced with each step. Her right front hoof had hit the water rather hard and it was badly sprained, whilst her ribs had been bruised. The guards took her with great care to stand before the two royal princesses who regarded her sternly; rather than bowing, Pinkie inclined her head.

"Pinkie Pie, I take it you are responsible for this... incident?" asked Celestia, waving a hoof at the glass shards strewn across the floor. She also indicated displeasure at the glowing magical shield which still hadn't been lowered and the the burning island which was all that remained of the North Tower.

"I am, your princess-ness-es. I was kinda speaking with my people and your people and they happened to mention that you wanted that ugly eyesore of a tower gone, and I had some extra fireworks and... um... well it *seemed* like a good idea at the time..."

"And your grand-daughter? Was almost drowning her part of your plan?"

Pinkie stepped closer, looking conspiratorially left and right, "I didn't mean for her to get mixed up in this, Princess Celestia, but... I couldn't leave her. She's... important."

Celestia raised an eyebrow before sharing a look with Luna, "Important?"

Pinkie Pie wagged her eyebrows and leaned forwards comically, "I-i-i-important."

“In that case, Pinkie Pie, I think it best we retire for tonight and discuss things in the morning. Your extra-special show tonight went down *extremely* well once I explained that it was a stunt from the one and only Pinkie Pie, if - as usual - a rather unorthodox one. Only you, dear Pinkie, could manage to be so predictably unpredictable.” Celestia’s words were harsh, but her eyes were bright.

“Princess Celestia...” began Pinkie Pie, she lifted a trembling hoof but her wiry pink frame was overcome with a coughing fit.

“Tomorrow,” said Celestia firmly, and nodded to the guards, who helped the old mare to leave the ballroom. “We will talk tomorrow.”

“And you,” scowled Candy Swirl at Fizzy Pop, “are so grounded.”

Fizzy’s head drooped and she fixed her eyes sullenly on the floor.

The room was lit by a single flickering candle. Plush rugs carpeted the floor around an overly-large, soft bed. It was well-endowed with thick, warm blankets and an abundance of pillows. Under the former and upon the latter rested a pony. Her breathing was heavy and laboured, with a wheezing cough that punctuated the silence every so often.

It was early morning. The moon was still high but would be going down in a few hours - the night would end soon, an end which would see the return of the warmth of the day, light, and life.

Pinkie stirred, her pillow wet with tears. She sobbed quietly as she clutched a small photograph to her chest. She quickly hid it under a pillow as she heard the soft clip-clop of an intruder.

“Pinkie, dearest one,” came a quiet voice from the shadows.

“Princess Luna? Come closer, Luna, I can’t see as well as I used to,” murmured Pinkie. She smiled when the dark blue alicorn stepped into the circle of light. “I knew it was you, even without you using your Royal Canterlot Speaking Voice.”

Luna dipped her head and nuzzled the earth pony fondly as Pinkie giggled to herself.

Luna rolled her eyes with mirth. "I enjoyed my birthday party, Pinkie. I can't conceive of any other pony pulling off a party even *half* as amazing or memorable."

"You're really not mad about the tower?"

Luna laughed softly. "My sister and I shall be smoothing ruffled feathers across the Nine Realms for months to come... however," Luna added quickly as Pinkie's ears drooped, "as an active drill to show that - as peaceful as we are - we *are* prepared for trouble, it may have done Equestria a world of good. It was also *spectacular*."

Pinkie coughed. "I'm glad. It's... it's what I do. If I can't make somepony laugh, what good am I?"

"Shhh, Pinkie dearest, you are one of my closest friends. You have been ever since you helped free me. I can never repay you."

"I have a few requests, Luna, and then I think we'll call it even stevens, 'kay?"

Luna considered it. "Name them, Pinkie Pie, Bearer of Laughter."

Pinkie lay still for a few moments before continuing, "You can come out now, dear. I know you're there."

Luna turned in amazement as a drawer in the nearby dresser opened sheepishly, and a small fuzzy mane attached to a foal's head emerged from it, "How, small creature, did you get in there?" the alicorn exclaimed, taking a few steps back.

"Ah-ah, that's going to remain a secret, Luna. Truth be told, I'm not sure either of us could explain it if we tried," laughed Pinkie. "May I introduce, once again, my grand-daughter Fizzy Pop?"

"Pleased to meet you." said Luna, extending a hoof. Fizzy Pop shook it and blushed. "To what do we owe the pleasure of your company tonight?" Luna asked.

"I... I came here t-to s-see Granny Pie, Princess. I wanted to make sure she wasn't hurt."

“After running down the outside of an exploding tower to dive into a freezing cold lake? Why, whatever would make you think that?” asked Luna witheringly.

“You saw that?” squeaked Fizzy Pop.

“I did, in my scrying orb, after all the fuss had died down. I watched it twice.”

Pinkie laughed from the bed. As it devolved into a spluttering cough. Luna dived to her old friend, but the earth pony waved her off, “Not now Luna. I need Fizzy to do something for me. Fizzy, I need you to fetch me my jewelry box from the dresser. Bring it here.”

Fizzy moved uncertainly towards the dresser. She knew which box Granny Pie meant; it had her cutie mark on it. Fizzy picked it up by the handle with her teeth and trotted back to the bed. She hopped up onto the covers and dropped it next to Granny.

“Open it up, Fizzy, there’s a good girl.”

Fizzy stared at the box. She poked it with a hoof until she lifted the latch and then she eased it open. She peered in, “It’s empty!”

Pinkie giggled, “That’s because you opened it wrong! Close it up again, and let’s see if you can do it right.”

Fizzy closed the box like she’d been caught stealing cookies. She stared mournfully back at her grandmother, who chuckled lightly.

“Now, sweetie, I want you to laugh at it. Three times.”

Fizzy tilted her head at Pinkie Pie, but did as she was bid, “Ha, ha, ha!”

“Now tap it three times with your hoof,” demanded Pinkie with a smile. “Good! Now open it!”

Fizzy eased the latch open and gasped. There, in the box, were two objects which hadn’t been there a moment before. “Wow! Is that shiny thingy... the Element of Laughter?”

“Indeedy doody it is, Fizzy Pop, and now I can give it to you! I’ve been keeping hold of it instead of letting Celestia hide it in that stuffy old vault of hers.”

“You’re going to give it to me?” asked Fizzy, “But... but... you can’t! It’s yours!”

Pinkie shook her head, “Not any more, Fizzy Pop. My time as the Bearer of Laughter is over, and I choose *you* as my successor. Pass me the piece of paper, Fizzy; Princess Luna and I need to make one small change to it.”

Fizzy watched as the two older ponies whispered conspiratorially, writing more on the strange piece of parchment, whispers finally punctuated by Luna exclaiming, “The whole thing?”

Pinkie nodded solemnly, “That’s how I know.”

Luna burst out laughing and made her final mark, “Do make sure they call on me when... when it is time.”

Pinkie seemed to fold at these words. she took a deep breath, “Luna, it *is* time. Fizzy,” Pinkie turned to Fizzy Pop and beckoned with a hoof, “Fizz dear, I need to tell you something.”

Fizzy crawled across the bed to snuggle up against Pinkie, who suddenly seemed a whole lot less... Pinkie.

“Remember, Fizzy, that I love you. Your mother loves you, your father loves you. I... won’t be able to see you again.”

“What?” exclaimed Fizzy, “Why!?”

“I’m... going on a journey,” Pinkie looked long and hard at Luna, until the alicorn bowed her head, “a *very* long journey.”

“Take me with you!” cried Fizzy, tears in her eyes.

Pinkie shook her head, her hair losing its shine as she drew a hoof across her muzzle. “No, no, no, I can’t. It’s a *special* kind of journey.”

“But who’ll teach me to blow up balloons?”

“You can already do that.”

“And bake cakes?”

“You can do that too!”

“And make great big huge explosions which cause pandemonium and panic?”

“That... may have to wait until you’re bigger.” Pinkie pulled the foal closer and hugged her tight.

“But who’ll keep me safe at night from the ghosts?” asked Fizzy in a teeny tiny voice.

Pinkie held Fizzy out at length and looked into her eyes, smiling softly, “You’ll have to be a brave girl and keep them away all by yourself from now on. I’ll tell you how to do it one more time, okay? And then you’ll have one last practice before you’ll need to remember it for when it’s your turn. Is that okay, little one?”

Fizzy nodded, sniffing, wiping a hoof across her muzzle. Pinkie settled the foal down next to her, and began to sing softly,

*“When I was a little filly and
the sun was going down,
the darkness and the shadows
they would always make me frown.*

*I’d hide under my pillows,
from what I thought I’d saw,
but Granny Pie said that wasn’t the way
to deal with things at all...”*

The song was short and comforting. As Pinkie Pie sang, the darkened room, with its flickering shadows, seemed warmer, softer, safer somehow.

“I love you, Granny Pie,” said Fizzy Pop, “I want you to sing to me forever.”

Pinkie Pie's eyes filled with tears. "I can't, Fizzy. It's not the way. I need you to do me a favour."

"Anything." said Fizzy, her eyes alight with hope.

"Be," Pinkie took a deep breath and lay back, her eyes closing, "strong."

Pinkie Pie, the Bearer of the Element of Laughter, lay back in bed. She breathed softly, shallow, the rising and falling of her chest lessening with each repetition until finally, it was if she wasn't breathing at all.

Fizzy would remark later that when great ponies pass on and the sages write of their lives and their struggles, sometimes nothing more can be said for closure but "and then she died".

Pinkie Pie, the tired, old and worn-out earth pony lay back in her bed and smiled. She was happy, exceedingly happy. Taking a deep breath and letting it slowly out, she closed her eyes for the final time, and then she died.

Fizzy nuzzled her grandmother as she felt the life leave the old pony's body. "Granny? Granny Pie? *Please* Granny! Please wake up!" said Fizzy, poking the form with a hoof. Granny Pie didn't stir. She never would. Fizzy's eyes filled to the brim with tears and overflowed as she threw herself at the small, frail form laying motionless in the bed, shaking it with both hooves and crying out loudly.

Luna finally stepped forward, scooping up the foal in her wings and kissed her softly on the forehead. Slowly, the sobbing stopped and Fizzy lay sniffling in Luna's embrace.

"Why?" she finally asked, voice plaintive and full of hurt.

Luna placed Fizzy Pop down on the bed, "It was her time, dearest one. It comes to everypony."

"But I love her!"

"And she loved you, very much. She had one final task for you, do you remember what it was?"

Fizzy Pop sniffled, wiping her snotty nose on a bedsheet, and nodded. "Granny Pie wanted me to scare off the ghosts."

"You shall get your chance."

Luna stepped back, and her horn glowed softly. The room lit up with the aetheric energy pouring from it. The strange light enveloped the still form of Pinkie Pie, and seemed almost to pull a glowing shadow from within. Like a surprise packet of exploding foam peanuts, the translucent form of a young earth pony with a full curly mane and tail poured into the room.

Fizzy looked up, and gasped, "Granny Pie!"

"Whee!" exclaimed the ghost of Pinkie Pie, whizzing around the room on hooves of gossamer. "This is so much more fun than being old!"

"Then stay with me! You can stay in my room and we can play after school and I can show you my toys and..."

Pinkie came to a stop and shook her ghostly head, "Nuh-uh little Fizz, I can't stay. I'm a ghostie, remember? Now, before I go, I need you to promise to take that box with you. It's yours now, as is everything in it. Present yourself at Sugar Cube Corner in Ponyville as soon as you can, *with* the box!"

"Why?"

"You're going to need to show a few ponies your necklace, and that piece of paper. Keep it safe, don't tell *anypony* how to open it! Promise? Pinkie Promise?"

"Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye!" swore Fizzy Pop solemnly.

"Yay!" shouted the ghost of Pinkie, turning backflips in the air. Fizzy smiled, and wiped the tears from her eyes. Pinkie swooped closer and licked softly at Fizzy's head, "You've got to go now, Little Fizz. It's not right you stay here, but before you do, you've got to show me you know how to deal with ghosties."

"No!" shouted Fizzy, "I don't wanna!"

“You must, Fizzy Pop, please? For me?”

“I don’t want you to go!”

“I have to, Fizzy, I don’t have much time left. Show me you can take care of yourself, and let me go on my journey happily, please?”

Fizzy hung her head, and let out a small “ha”.

Pinkie swirled around the room and made faces. “Wooo-oooo! You can do better than that!”

“Hah!” shouted Fizzy, “Ha, ha, ha!”

“Ack, ya got me!” Pinkie floated closer, her form less distinct now, “Thank you.”

There was the lightest of touches on her forehead as the last few tears fell to the bed, and when Fizzy Pop looked up, Pinkie was gone.

“Be strong, little bearer, and remember what your mentor has taught you.” said Luna, and with a swirl of her magnificent wings, she too dissolved into shadow.

Fizzy Pop turned to the still form on the bed. She gave one final kiss to the forehead and whispered, “Goodbye, Granny Pie.” before she picked up the box with her teeth and hopped into the drawer.

Sugar Cube Corner, once naught but a humble bakery, was the administration center for Pinkie Pie’s Party Emporium, and it was in uproar. In the middle of all this, strode a small filly foal with a box in her muzzle. The box, for it was spoken of in hushed whispers and greatly sought after, was taken from her several times and opened, but since it was empty, it was always given back.

“Fizzy Pop, I can’t think *why* you were summoned to appear for the Reading of the Will, they can’t even *find* the Will!”

Fizzy Pop stopped, and looked back at her mother. She put the box down and cocked her head, “Mama, what’s a Will?”

Candy Swirl pranced nervously on her hooves and finally looked at the grounds, "Fizzy, Pinkie... isn't on a trip."

"She's gone, isn't she Mama?" Fizzy looked for confirmation from her parent, even though she already knew.

Candy Swirl nodded, tears in her eyes. She blinked hard, trying to hide them. Fizzy Pop nuzzled her mother softly, "I miss her too, Mama. At least I've got you and Papa! I love you!"

"Oh Fizzy Pop, I miss her so!"

Mother and daughter hugged in the middle of the bedlam until they stopped crying, Candy even gave her daughter a small smile. "Come on," she sniffed and straightened herself, smiling warmly down at her daughter, "I know you're up to something. I may not have inherited my mother's Pinkie Sense, but my tail is twitching something fierce. Just what is it you're up to, and where did you get mother's jewelry box?"

"Granny gave it to me, she said I was to keep it. I need to bring it here today."

"Then let's make it happen."

Fizzy Pop strode into the main office and, putting both forehooves on the wooden desk, deposited the box in front of an officious-looking grey unicorn with spectacles perched upon his muzzle, "Granny Pie said I should bring this here."

"Then you are the one for whom an entire crate of Bubbly Butts Best Burper Real Authentic Soda was delivered, hmm?" asked the stallion with an amused expression on his face.

Fizzy smiled. "I sure am! Luna said..."

"Princess Luna?" gasped Candy Swirl, "Fizzy, explain yourself! Just what are you?"

"It's quite alright, Madame," interrupted a new feminine voice, "I am indeed expecting your daughter today."

"If we are all here," harrumphed the unicorn behind the desk, "then I believe you have two things to present to me?"

Fizzy Pop danced with joy and shut the door, her blue eyes twinkling. She took the box under the table and began to fiddle with it. When her mother stuck her head down to see just what her little filly was doing, Fizzy Pop gently pushed her mother's muzzle away. "Nuh uh! This is a secret! Granny Pie made me Pinkie Promise!"

"Allow her this, Madame Swirl, humour a little filly," laughed Princess Luna. Candy Swirl's gaze darkened slightly with confusion, but she nodded. A few seconds later, Fizzy Pop emerged from under the desk, dragging her box with her. It was open, and within it were two objects. One of them was an ornate piece of jewelry with a gem the shape of a balloon set into it, the other was a piece of parchment which Fizzy gave to the unicorn.

The unicorn took hold of the scroll and unrolled it with his magic, studying it intently, before he spoke, "Is this correct, Luna? This is your Royal Signature?"

"It is," replied Luna solemnly, "and the little one must discharge her duty correctly before the instructions in this, the last will and testament of Pinkie Pie, can be carried out."

"Instructions? Will? Is that..?"

"Indeed it is, madame," replied the unicorn, "and your daughter must pass a test to receive her due."

"A test?" asked Candy Swirl, highly flustered now. She turned to her filly, but Fizzy Pop had already downed three of the bottles of soda and was setting to a fourth. A bottle or two later and her eyes were crossed from holding it all in.

Then, to the horror of her mother and to howls of laughter from Luna, she began to burp the alphabet. She burped the alphabet loudly and proudly, and she burped *the whole thing*.