

# Words are Louder and My Little Muffin

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# Words are Louder

Birds chirped happily in the trees that morning, as they did the morning before, and the morning before that, and every other morning since the day after Winter Wrap-up. They swooped from their nests upon the branches to collect their morning meals. The early bird, after all, does indeed get the worm. But, as Celestia's sun crept across the early reaches of the daytime sky, many ponies still slept.

However, in a modest house near the centre of the sleepy little town, one pony defied convention, as she did every weekday morning. The blonde mare made her way down the stairs cautiously, the early morning sunlight nearly blinding her through her descent from her bedroom. She had just enough time to grab a quick bite to eat before heading off to work for the morning, and if she was anything, she was punctual.

Digging into the refrigerator, only her bubbly flank would be visible to any pony standing in the hall. She lived alone, so she made no effort to stifle the clanking of bowls, or the pouring of cereal. Sitting on the table, however, sat a book she was reading the night before, pages still exposed to the ceiling above. The mare quickly retrieved her bookmark, nestled it into the spine, then shut her book, revealing its title to be "20,000 Leagues under the Sea". It was a literary classic written by none other than Burning Jewels, who lived over a hundred years ago, speaking of undreamt marvels.

A smile crept upon her face as she laughed inwardly at her own forgetfulness. How could she have left such a classic out in the open like that? After finishing her quick breakfast, she made sure to deposit it back on the bookshelf in her living room where it rightly belonged. The mare quickly made sure all the doors and windows were locked before she grabbed her hat off the stand by the door and left for work.

Sure, being a mailpony wasn't her first career choice... but she had to admit that the job had grown on her, and she simply couldn't imagine herself doing anything else. Derpy Hooves smiled as she took off into the early morning sky. There wasn't any better time to fly than in the morning to her.

The morning dew of the early summer morning still shimmered in the light, giving off the illusion that the ground below was made of precious gemstones.

Inevitably, there came the time when she had to descend from her lofty perch, landing in front of the Ponyville Post Office. It was a rather small building, considering the number of ponies it served, but they somehow managed to get the job done every weekday morning and afternoon. In the morning, the mail ponies would go around door to door and check every single post box for an outgoing letter. Then, in the afternoon, after sorting, they would be distributed.

Oddly, the thought never occurred to them to cancel that service and have the ponies drop off their mail in fewer, but larger collection boxes. They'd be guarded by lock and key to assure nothing got tampered with, unlike the current system. Derpy had tried to voice her idea before, but... there were difficulties.

The grey mare quietly rounded to the back door of the Post Office and slipped inside. Already, her fellow mail ponies were gathering their bags, or having a cup of coffee to get going before the long day ahead. As usual, nopony spoke a word to her as she walked over to her locker and collected her bag. Work didn't begin for another five minutes, but she liked to make sure she had everything. She had a bad habit of misplacing things.

"Morning, Derp," came a bright cheery voice when she emerged in the Break Room. Derpy quickly identified the pony as Fairybelle, a rather new pony to the team, but she seemed nice enough. Fairybelle was a bright and cheerful Earth Pony who sported a lavender pink coat and a short cyan mane. Her flank bore a cutie mark in the shape of a speeding letter. Obviously, she had a talent in getting packages and mail to their destinations quickly. Derpy had no doubt she would become Postmistress of Ponyville one day.

"Pickles fly!" Derpy replied, waving a hoof at her in greeting. The younger pony giggled a little at the unusual response as everypony did.

"Sorry, Derp," she smiled, realizing her faux pas. "It's just that you say such random things!"

Sadly, by now the filly had been exposed to her exploits by her coworkers. Derpy could tell she was apologizing just to make nice, but she really still thought of her the same way everypony did.

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Walking through town later that morning, the young mare slowly became apprehensive as the route passed her by. The exchange with her co-worker had left her doubting herself and her plans for the day. Derp's saddlebags began to dig into her back a little from the weight of all the mail she had picked up, plus a rather hefty package from Bon-bon to Lyra, which she suspected was jammed full of chocolates. She didn't care much for chocolate: Derpy would prefer a muffin any day of the week.

Speaking of muffins, the mailmare slowly approached her next stop. It was an old and interesting building in town, since it wasn't a building at all; but rather, a tree. She approached the Library a little apprehensively as today was Wednesday, and knowing the pony's habits, she probably had a letter to deliver. Ever since she came to Ponyville, Twilight Sparkle had attracted Derpy's attention. Not in the romantic sort of way, but in the kindred spirit sort of way.

Tales had spread wide and far about the purple mare's love of a good book, and her above-average intelligence. Derpy wasn't one to brag, since she could never seem to say what she wanted anyway, but the two had at least that much in common. Perhaps, her mind raced, they could even be friends one day. To this end, the gray mare took a deep breath and knocked on the door of the Library.

"Just a minute," echoed the voice of the unicorn from behind the door. The Library didn't have a mailbox, so Derpy had to receive the letters... right from the horse's mouth, one might say. She waited in anticipation at the door, hoping to Celestia that her lazy eyes didn't start to act up... or that she could get at least one word she wanted past her lips.

"Oh, Hi... um... Derpy," Twilight spoke as she opened the door. "I'm sorry about the delay, but Spike was begin his usual unproductive self." She shot a look back into the building as she spoke the last few words, dripping with sarcasm.

"I haven't eaten yet, what do you expect, Twi?" A whiny voice echoed from inside the tree.

The purple mare shook her head and rolled her eyes to the ceiling. "Boys," she remarked before reaching over to a side table and gathering up a letter in her teeth. Derpy took the letter happily and stuffed it into her saddle bag. She shuffled her hoof awkwardly at the door, trying to bring herself to say something.

"Um..." Derpy spoke softly. It wasn't often that she'd try to start a conversation, and even more rarely during her route. Still, disorder be damned, she was going to talk to this mare. She burrowed her brow in deep concentration, the look seemed to surprise Twilight, as her pupils narrowed and she stepped back nervously.

"Uh... are you okay, Derpy?" She spoke, concerned that the mailpony was having some sort of attack.

"I...I...icicles... like fish!" A look of horror came upon the blonde pony as she covered her mouth with a hoof. "K...kelp eats breakfast in Virginia."

Twilight couldn't quite explain what was happening, but it was beginning to creep her out. "Okay," she chuckled awkwardly. "Well, I'm sure you've got a lot of work to do, and I just remembered this fascinating book I've just gotta read so... see you later." With that, the door of the library unceremoniously closed in Derpy's face. Her ears drooping in despair, she realized she'd blown her one chance at a good first impression. Twilight must have thought that she was... that she was...

A tear dropped down her eye as it drifted to a corner of her face, the young mare's head hung low as she reluctantly continued her morning route.

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Derpy Hooves dropped her bag into the sorting room, having just wiped some tears off of her face. Her boss, a brown stallion with a grizzled, gray mane and a five o'clock shadow on his face frowned at her. "Derpy!" He exclaimed angrily. "You're five minutes late, you feather brain!"

"Kumquats," she muttered apologetically as she turned tail. Perhaps a walk

through town during her break would take her mind off of things? She had about an hour to kill anyway... and there was only one thing that could cheer this sorrowful pony up. The winged equine decided to take flight to her destination, a haven in times both good and bad; a place that boasted itself as the haunt of a mare who could cheer up anypony: Sugarcube Corner.

It was around noon, so Mr. and Mrs. Cake were busy in the kitchen while their hired hoof, Pinkie Pie, minded the customers.

"Hi, Derpy," the pink pony cheered happily. "What kinda muffin can I get you today?" That radiant smile, Derpy swore, could lift even the most down pony. She paused for a minute, considering.

"Bumblefoot, turkey!" The Pegasus pony announced.

"You're in luck!" Pinky chirped. "The Blueberry ones just came out of the oven!"

Of all the ponies she had ever met, Pinkie Pie was the only one who could understand her insane murmurings. She'd try to get her to speak on her behalf before, but nopony would believe her. They seemed to think that Pinkie wasn't acting as an interpreter, but would rather insert what she thought Derpy was actually saying. Needless to say, the whole thing was quite frustrating.

Pinky's smile suddenly faded as she looked into Derpy's yellow eyes. They weren't 'derped' as everypony called it, so why did she stare? "Are you okay, Derpy? You look sorta sad."

Derpy shook her head. Was the whole incident with Twilight really that easy to read? Speaking of reading, the mare remembered a book she had at home on the subject... she'd long since abandoned her attempts to explain Pinky, much like Twilight previously. Unlike her, however, the gray mare didn't have to learn it the hard way, and she was grateful for that, considering.

"Lions nest in spring," Derpy started. "...bees sting on the dot. Light sink in a cupcake sky."

"Oh..." Pink voiced in realization. "Well, she can be all fuddy-duddy like that, but Twilight's okay when you get to know her. You just gotta try a different approach!" Again, the wickedly uplifting smile spread across her face, and the blonde mare couldn't help but return it. She passed the pink earth pony her bits and took the muffin in gratitude. "Then even if you made a complete, total disaster of the first go, you've got the second go to make up for it!"

Derpy Hooves spent the rest of her lunch hour in the break room back in the post office. The other ponies chatted idly among themselves while she sat at a small corner table and dwelt on Pinkie's words. Perhaps she did need a new approach to communicate with Twilight... but that begged the question: how was she going to go about it?

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A few days later, during her normal delivery route, she would find the answer. One of the ponies on her delivery route that afternoon was a special case. He was a typical stallion, nothing really remarkable about him. It was more his brother, who lived in Hoofinton, that was the remarkable one. The mailmare trotted up to the door and knocked on it lightly. The stallion of the home answered, his brown coat and black mane shimmering in the light.

"Ah, hey Derpy," he spoke softly. "I take it if you're here, then I have a letter from that dear brother of mine?"

"Fish paste!" Derpy chirped, handing over the letter. His brother, you see, had the most appalling writing anypony had ever seen. It was more akin to scribbles than it was to actual letters. Still, his letter, plus her translated version, was always well received by his brother. He looked at his newest letter, and a smile spread across his face.

"You know, Derpy," he started. "You have a talent for making things clear on paper that otherwise nopony would understand."

In that beaming face, an epiphany had washed over the mare. She could not help but share his smile, though he had no idea why. It was all so obvious to her now. Why had she not thought of it earlier? Derpy scolded herself inwardly as she finished her route for that day. She must really have



been stupid if it wasn't clear to her before! Suddenly, she was quite looking forward to her next encounter with Twilight Sparkle.

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It was Wednesday again, a week to the day since her first ill-fated attempt at talking to the purple unicorn. This time, however, things would be different. It was her afternoon route: Twilight had not been around that morning, meaning she had no outgoing mail. Ah well, that didn't matter to the grey pony, for she could fit her in regardless. She knocked politely on the door of the library, an annoyed and frazzled Twilight thrusting it open.

"WHAT!?" she exclaimed a little louder than she intended. "Oh, it's you. Sorry about that." Twilight smiled apologetically at her outburst.

"Jellyfish!" Derpy exclaimed happily, presenting the violet unicorn with a bunch of letters.

"Oh, thank you." The unicorn gingerly took the mail from her, and before she could say another word to the Pegasus, she had already trotted off on her route. "It must be nice to be such a simple pony," she added after she left.

Twilight's mail was of the usual sort. Letters from some ponies she didn't talk to very often, her subscription to 'Magic Monthly Magazine,' and the odd flier or two from some of the local shops in town. However, a curious letter lay among them that she just had to open first. On the envelope, you see, in elegant, cursive handwriting, which she briefly mistook for Princess Celestia's, read the word, "*Twilight.*"

Interested, she placed all the others onto the side table and sat in the middle of the Library on a cushion to read aloud, to nopony in particular.

"*Ms Twilight Sparkle,*

*I would like to take this moment to apologize for my abysmal behaviour this Wednesday past. You must think of me as a baseline idiotic pony, who can only speak in inane outbursts. While my speech impediment may ring true, I have no doubt that the extent of my mental capacity is making itself evident to you as these words pass your eyes by. Please, allow me to explain myself to you, succinctly from the beginning.*

*I experience a mental block in regard to my vocal abilities. The only word I can seem to utter on command is "muffin" as well as its plural form. In addition, I tend to misplace items of importance and have a curious pair of lazy eyes.*

*As for my conduct last Wednesday, I sense I may have startled you, but I sincerely meant no harm. You see, I have admired you from afar for some time now. Not in a romantic capacity, but in a more... platonic capacity, I daresay. You see, I am an avid lover of both classic and contemporary literature and would like to discuss such with a pony of your intellect.*

*Alas, most ponies see me as dim-witted, or simply would not understand me should I deign to write to them in this fashion. However, I believe that you do. I apologize for my logorrhea, and shall get to the point of this missive. Last Wednesday, I simply wanted to ask you to join me at Mr. Shake's that Saturday afternoon so we could get to know each other a little better. You could use your words, and I a pen and pad to express myself properly. It is not something I'd do for anypony though.*

*If you are interested, please intercept me on my route tomorrow morning. Failing that, a simple visible token left on your door will do. It can be anything you wish.*

*Hoping to converse soon,*

*Derpy Hooves."*

Twilight read the letter over repeatedly, wondering how her eyes could deceive her so. How could such a... unique pony like Derpy Hooves possess such a command of the English language? There were some words in that letter that she didn't think anypony else knew, and she had been the bookworm of any group for as long as she could remember! Perhaps... perhaps she had been a little quick to judge her... but never in her life had she been so wrong.

The purple pony needed a minute to clear her head. She stepped out onto the balcony and took in a breath of fresh air. If this Derpy Hooves was really so smart, perhaps she'd have to see it in person... have her write like that right in front of her face. She probably just had a smart friend write that

letter for her... that had to be it!

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A couple of days later, Spike was napping in the Library when the sudden slam of a door echoed through the building. "Spike!" came the all-too familiar bellow of a very bossy pony. He rolled onto his side and reluctantly left the warmth of his blanket behind. Obviously, he had not moved fast enough, since he heard his name called a second time with greater volume and urgency.

"Just wait until I'm all grown up," he muttered darkly as he walk down the stairs. "Yeah, Twi?"

"Take a letter, Spike," the pony replied. Spike couldn't help but notice a distinct mixture of shame, embarrassment, and a touch of envy on the face of the unicorn as he reached for a scroll and quill.

"Alright, shoot," he spoke in an irritated manner.

"*Dear Princess Celestia,*

*Further to an earlier letter, about never judging a book by it's cover, I learned today that the same thing can even go for ponies you know. You never really know a pony until you've sat down and really talked, laughed, and shared interests together. You might just be surprised with how many acquaintances turn out to be friends you never knew you had.*

*On a more personal note, I also learned that, no matter how smart one thinks they are, there is probably somepony out there who is even smarter.*

*Your faithful student,*

*Twilight Sparkle."*

# My Little Muffin

## Part 1

Soft, classical music echoed through the halls and rooms of the humble abode that night. It was a gentle tune, violins and bass bringing forth a powerful, yet emotional crescendo. For some reason, ponies liked playing Posh Ball's 'Canon in D Major' at weddings, possibly to reflect what they hoped the future would bring. Meanwhile, Derpy Hooves busied herself with fixing her dinner: she was not nearly conceited enough to play this sort of thing while reading.

The amber-eyed pony hummed along with the tune as she chopped up some celery to put in her salad, looking out her window and into the night sky. Although it grew warmer in her house by the minute, she didn't dare open the windows or else succumb to the horrid stench that came when hundreds of ponies expelled the contents of their stomachs. Derpy shook her head at the thought, dumping the chopped vegetable into her salad.

It all started out innocently enough. The town threw a massive party to celebrate its founding, so Pinkie naturally had to bake a magnificent cake for all in attendance. However, unbeknownst to the pink baker, the ingredients for the cake had spoiled. Needless to say, anypony who had a piece of the massive confection quickly ended up having their stomach pumped before the virus could get into their bloodstream. Some moulds can be pretty nasty.

Grabbing a bottle of milk from inside her fridge, the mailmare emptied the contents into a waiting glass, the record playing out its final notes as she took her first bite. It was a perfectly normal meal fitting a rather abnormal pony. Nights like this made the Pegasus realize how alone she really was in the world, and how much the hurt of past pains continued to vex her. Even though she had largely moved on, some of them could never be forgotten.

Unlike most Pegasus ponies, Derpy was born and raised in Hoofington, a town twice the size of Ponyville. All things considered, it was a good place to grow up, though not as homey or friendly as her new home. Where the

ponies here mostly tolerated her... peculiarities... her old town was much less kind. Her inability to speak properly and curious eyes inspired the notion of mental incompetence in the rest of the town. She was, predictably, bullied and called names by the other foals, and even some of the more brazen adults.

Still, the mare never let that stop her, not for an instant. Despite everything they did to make her feel worthless and stupid, she demonstrated a learning capacity beyond her years, having learned to fly first out of all the Pegasus ponies of her year. Not to mention her Cutie Mark... but that would be a story for another day. Eventually, after having been told that she could never teach due to her disability, Derpy settled for a job as a mailmare in the Royal Equestrian Postal Service.

For the time being, Derpy focused on the meal before her, trying to push past those bad memories of the past and focus on the happier ones. The tantalizing aroma of her salad, complete with dressing of her own blend, floated into her nostrils as she ate. Bits of onions, peppers, tomato and pieces of stale bread brought forward an incomparable texture to the normally dull meal. It was almost enough for her to not notice when her lazy eyes acted up again.

An unknown amount of time later, the gray mare cleaned her plate. Gently taking the delicate porcelain into her mouth, Derpy fluttered over to the kitchen sink to clean up. A quick scrub of the plate later, the straw-maned Pegasus trotted over to her fridge and drew her favourite dessert of all time: a chocolate muffin. She wished she knew who first made this wonderful pastry. If she did, and had a time machine to meet them, she would like nothing more than to shake their hoof and thank them from the bottom of her heart.

However, halfway through her precious muffin, a terrible, awful sound filled her ears and made the hair in her mane stand on-end. The bell's toll rung in her ears like a terrible cry, chilling the grey Pegasus to her very soul. Derpy sprang into action immediately, forgetting about her delicious dessert. She dashed up the stairs and into her room at full gallop, thrusting aside the sliding doors of her wardrobe.

With a flurry of hooves, the mare quickly shuffled her attire down the metal rod, aiming for the last on the rack. It was a brown jacket with long

sleeves and reflective, yellow tape circling the cuffs and lining the back. The jacket bore her name on the front, just below the neckline. The number fifteen was embroidered on the back in bold, black lettering. She grabbed it in her teeth and quickly stepped into it, pulling down a yellow helmet from the shelf above, placing it gingerly on her head.

A last minute adjustment had her wings pop out of the slits on either side of the firepony uniform, allowing her to spread her wings and take flight out of the window. It did not take long to see the source of the flames and smoke from her aerial vantage point: a small house on the other side of town. Wasting no time, the volunteer firemare took off to join her comrades. In a town with buildings made of wood and hay, time was definitely a factor.

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Despite her quick reaction time, Derpy found that she was not the first pony to arrive on the scene. Her fellow Pegasus and good friend Raindrop hovered over about half a dozen other ponies as they started attaching the hoses to the closest fire hydrant. Other airborne ponies gathered up as many clouds as they could, pouring water into them to get them as wet as possible. In Ponyville, hovering rainclouds over the scene of a fire served as a delaying tactic to stall the flames as much as possible.

Meanwhile, two other teams would address any other issues that needed handling. Unicorns would lead teams that attached hoses to the fire hydrants and direct them to douse the flames, since the water pressure could easily overpower most earth ponies. In addition, the final team would brave the fires and head inside to ensure everypony got out as safely as possible. Of course, sometimes things would not go as planned, or ponies would be too slow and become injured or, unfortunately, die.

Raindrop, as Ponyville's chief firemare, directed new ponies as they ran down the streets, or flew across the skies overhead, many of them not in uniform. In a town this size, everypony had a job to do during a fire to help put it out and to stop it from spreading. Already, flames began to lick the adjacent houses, their occupants evacuating the area. "Derpy!" the golden Pegasus addressed her friend. "Always one of the first on the scene, aren't you? Listen closely: I want you to round up a team of five ponies to get in there and get any stragglers out."

A front hoof swiftly met the straw-maned pony's forehead as Derpy saluted the Chief. "Wagon jam!" she chirped in reply. With great haste, the mailmare flew down to the ground to round up a team. Since every pony knew of her disability, they devised a series of hoof-signals for her to use in times of crisis, rather than trying to decipher her inane babbling. "Squirrels cuddle fish in lighthouses!" It did not really mean anything; she just wanted to say something to get their attention.

The firemare pulled aside three Earth ponies and two other Pegasus ponies to aid her in her search. "Jackal, Mongoose, Rabbit. Tickle gophers lightly!" the wall-eyed Pegasus ordered, using her signals as well to tell the three earth ponies to check the ground floor. "Zebu, Daffodil. Kick sky potatoes," she continued, telling the other two Pegasus ponies to join her checking the top floor.

"Hey!" voiced the white mare Derpy addressed as Daffodil. "How come they get animals, but I'm a plant!?" Obviously, she didn't know her well enough to know there was no rhyme or reason to her outbursts.

"We've got more important things to worry about right now!" shouted a cyan earth pony, already galloping off to the supply cart. Derpy and the rest of the fire ponies quickly followed suit, fitting on oxygen tanks and masks. Although they were a little cumbersome, the tanks still allowed for flight, even if only just. The masks covered their entire faces and curved to form an air-tight seal to protect them from smoke inhalation.

"Monkey, hop!" the mailmare chirped to the other ponies in her group. They did not need signals to tell them she meant for them to go in, thankfully. With the ferocity of a hurricane, the six ponies braved the tongues of flame and penetrated into the heart of the fire. Derpy entered the upstairs hall to find walls of flames dancing around her, the heat nearly unbearable.

She called out every few steps, random words replacing her pleas for a pony to call out in aid. Hopefully, just the sound of a voice calling out would suffice. Derpy strained to see through the blinding grey smoke, depending completely on her other senses to navigate. Still, she kept calling out as loud as she could, secretly hoping that nopony but the six fireponies currently dwelt within.

However, her heart sank when a shrill "HELP!" echoed forth from somewhere beyond the torrent of smoke and flame. Derpy Hooves called out louder than before, hoping the voice would continue to communicate. Eventually, she came upon a door, the cries for help clearly echoing from beyond. Remembering her training, the Pegasus placed her hoof lightly on the door, feeling for any heat for fear of a backdraft. If there was fire in the room that used up most of the oxygen, it would burst forward and incinerate anything in its path when more air rushed in from the open door. She shuddered as she remembered watching the dramatization.

Feeling no heat on the other side of the door, the gray mare turned around and bucked with all her strength, breaking the door open. The shrill voice cried out in surprise at the sudden intrusion, but Derpy ignored it and pressed forward. Hidden under the bed cowered a small unicorn foal, mane a pale blonde and coat a purplish-gray with amber eyes that screamed in terror.

The firemare quickly closed the gap between her and the cowering foal, wasting no time in her trot. She reached under the bed to grab her, the unicorn quickly latching on to the mare in desperation. It was just in the nick of time as a flaming timber landed on top of the bed she took refuge under, prompting a scream from the small filly. Derpy hugged the tiny thing close to her and slowly backed away from the flaming wreckage, feeling the floor underhoof begin to give way.

Thinking quickly, the mare flapped her wings with all her strength, lifting the filly as well as the heavy equipment right before the floor fell through. A wall of flames shot up around the pair, the little unicorn screaming and kicking in complete terror as Derpy tried to keep them aloft. It would be only a matter of seconds before the rest of the room caught on fire, meaning she needed to act fast.

Spying a window to her right, the gray Pegasus charged flying head-first into the second story window. The glass shattered around her as she made impact, her jacket and helmet mostly protecting her from the myriad of razor-sharp shards. With the filly tucked in close to her, the mailmare could only hope her own body shielded the fragile filly enough.

Derpy gently placed the shaking filly on the ground and into the waiting hooves of the nurse ponies as she landed on the ground. She took off her



mask and helmet, wiping her sweating brow in triumph over saving the young foal. "Derpy!" exclaimed Nurse Headheart. "You're bleeding! Come with me in the tent, now!" At first, the mailmare tried to resist the nurse. She and doctors had never been on the best of terms, but seeing her wings dripping small streams of blood prompted her to give in.

Reluctantly, she took off her jacket and air tank, wincing as the tiny shards of glass cut deeper into her wings as she removed the article of clothing. She hardly noticed the tiny unicorn clutching her forehoof as if her life depended upon it. "Dear," spoke the nurse. "I can't make sure you're okay if you keep clutching to her like that!"

"No!" the little filly cried. "Not until Mommy and Daddy come!" Derpy gave the nurse a look, gesturing that she did not mind, as long as it made the poor thing feel better. The mare brought her hoof in closer, and used her other forehoof to gently stroke the sobbing and scared filly as the nurse gingerly removed the glass from her wings. Derpy winced slightly with each shard removed from her tender wings. Looking over the sobbing unicorn, the Pegasus figured she could not be more than five years old or so.

Frowning, the nurse applied an ointment to prevent infection, then bandaged her wings. "Now, Derpy," the nurse started. "You won't be able to fly for a week, okay?" The blonde Pegasus nodded her head in reply and climbed onto one of the hospital beds, to make sure the filly clutching her was comfortable. "What's your name, little one?" The nurse asked the poor, traumatized foal.

"D-D-Dinky," she muttered, still shaking from the recent events.

"Well, Dinky, wouldn't you be a little more comfortable on a bed of your own?"

"NO!" She screeched, clutching the grown Pegasus with enough strength to cut off the blood circulation. Derpy frowned a little at the poor foal, nuzzling her gently, which seemed to calm her down. Defeated, the nurse trotted out of the tent, allowing the unicorn and her saviour to be alone.

"Coconut harness," the blonde Pegasus muttered into her ear, hoping to calm her down, even if she could not understand. She tried to tell her that everything would be okay, but as usual, her stupid disability got in the way

of any meaningful communication. Perhaps she should go through with that spell Twilight offered. The one to let her communicate with other ponies for once.

Together, the two laid down on the bed: the small filly's shaking eventually fading away as time passed on. However, deep in the mind of the firemare, she began to worry about the poor foal's parents. Surely, her team must have found them by now, right? Sadly, no answer came to her as she continued to comfort the sobbing unicorn, the minutes slowly passing into hours.

Eventually, three ponies lead by the nurse entered the tent. It was the mayor and two of Derpy's search ponies, each of them dragging a white sack filled with something heavy. The blond Pegasus' heart dropped as she realized the solemn look on their faces: forcing herself to fight back tears for the little filly's sake. Instead, she put on a brave face and continued to comfort the unicorn.

"Doesn't she have anypony else in town?" the nurse asked the mayor in whispers as the two bags were set on some beds.

"No, sadly," the political pony replied, "I'm not sure what we're going to do with her. We can't simply give her away to an orphanage, but she has no place to stay while I look for any kin in another town." A rare sigh passed the composed mares lips, her head lowered in mourning. It was times like this that made her regret a career in politics.

Unnoticed by any of the adults present, the little unicorn had slipped off the hoof of the grown Pegasus, curiosity over the bags temporarily overpowering her distraught. She blinked before using her mouth to open the zipper on the closest bag, seeing her mother napping inside of it. "Oh, Mommy, you're so silly!" she chirped. "Taking a nap inside of a bag like that? Is Daddy playing the same game? Is this like hide-and-go seek, 'cause I'm really good at it!"

A moment passed in the tent when the most audible sound was their own breathing as the adults looked at the filly with a mixture of surprise and sorrow. Derpy got to her hooves and slowly walked over to her, for the moment when realization would hit. "Come on, Mommy. Wake up. You win! I give up!" She fell silent for a minute, waiting for a reply that would never

come.

"Mommy?" she asked, prodding a little with her hoof. "M-mommy? Wake up, Mommy... you're scaring me... Mommy? Mommy! Wake up, Mommy, this isn't funny... MOMMY!!!"

"Dinky..." started Nurse Redheart. "She... she's never going to wake up... Daddy either. They... they breathed in too much bad stuff and... well... they stopped breathing. We tried as hard as we could, but they just wouldn't start again... I'm so very sorry, Dinky."

"No!" the little filly cried out in pain. "Mommy's just... just playing with Dinky! She'll wake up! She always does! Mommy? The other ponies say you won't wake up... please, please show them that you're just playing. Please, Mommy!" After a while of shaking, prodding and screaming, the poor little filly came to realize that her mom was not playing. She really was never going to wake up... she was just going to leave her, alone and cold in the world.

Derpy cuddled the crying foal close as a cascade of tears rivalling a large waterfall fell down her cheeks and onto the dirt. The blonde mare could not help but cry too as she gently ran her hoof down her back, whispering quiet nothings into her ear to help soothe her. Meanwhile, the other ponies present silently bowed their heads as the nurse zipped up the bag containing the deceased mare.

The mayor quietly walked over to the sobbing filly, lowering her head to talk to her. "Dinky, do you have any family here in Ponyville? An aunt, or uncle, or cousins or something you can stay with? Perhaps a friend or two if not?" She frowned as the filly shook her head and continued to sob, but spying the look on the mailmare gave her an idea. "Well... how about you stay with Ms. Derpy for a while? At least, until we figure out how to help you, okay?"

All she could do was shudder and nod her head, too swept up in emotion and sorrow to really register what was being said. She needed something warm to latch onto and the Pegasus proved to be the closest thing available. "I'm willing to give you some time off, Derpy, so please don't worry about going to work in the morning," the mayor continued. "Consider yourself on paid vacation, until things settle, at least."

The mailmare nodded her head and picked up the sobbing filly, placing her gently on her back before trotting slowly out of the medical tent. She purposefully avoided the charred remains of the once handsome home, moving slowly through the darkened streets, the cries from the unicorn the only sound above that of her hooves clopping against the cobblestone streets.

Arriving at home a few short minutes later, Derpy found that the poor little foal had sobbed herself to sleep. She quietly walked up the stairs and deposited her in her own bed before returning to the kitchen to finish her muffin. It had been a very long night for the both of them, and the blonde Pegasus could not help but frown at the poor thing's loss. To have her parents taken from her so young must have been heartbreaking. After finishing the baked good, she returned upstairs and laid in bed beside her, so that when she woke up, she would find at least a little comfort.

"Stars yip, muffin," Derpy spoke softly to Dinky before giving her a hug, drifting off to sleep soon after.

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The next few days passed slowly for Derpy and Dinky, the sorrow in the house quite apparent to even the most socially inept pony. A sizable crowd came out to mourn the loss of the young foal's parents, mostly those involved in the attempt to save them from the flames. Up until that point, the blonde unicorn refused to wander more than a hoof away from the mare that saved her life.

It was the Monday after the funeral that Derpy stopped cuddling the mourning filly near constantly. The day started out as the others did, except the pair woke up far earlier than usual. Placing a bowl of cereal in front of the pouting unicorn, the mailmare tried to put on a stern face as she refused to eat, pushing the food away every time she brought it closer to her.

"I don't wanna go to school!" the filly whined. "I miss Mommy and Daddy and I don't feel good and my tummy hurts and my hoof hurts and..." A stern look from the Pegasus made the young unicorn stop with her complaining, seeing that she would not take those excuses.

"Jewels sparkle dimly, muffin," Derpy started. "Pickle, pies taste like sprinkles." She held out a spoon to Dinky's mouth, planning to feed her like a newborn, if need be. However, the young filly's expression took an unusual turn, going from pouting to shocked, then finally, a smile cracked across her face, making her giggle.

"Oh, lady," she chirped. "You're so silly! Dinky wants to try!" Just then, the filly tried to cross her amber eyes, telling Derpy that her own eyes did that thing again. Thinking quickly, the grown mare started making faces at the foal, prompting more giggles and ever full-on laughter. "Ow! That hurts!" she exclaimed after trying to make her eyes do the same thing, "Why can't I do it too? I want to make super silly faces too!"

The mailmare chuckled and played with the little one's mane a bit, smiling as she finally decided to eat on her own. It would be a long time yet before the filly would come even close to being her normal self, but Derpy did not mind tending to the poor thing in the meantime. She just hoped that if she did have an aunt or uncle able to take her, they would be able to give her the love and attention she deserved.

After a little bit of effort, the pair left the house and started the somewhat lengthy walk to school, which resided on the outskirts of town. Derpy never attended school in Ponyville, but she knew the building well from the times she would deliver mail to the town's teacher, Cheerilee. Unlike most of the adults in town, the teacher was one of the few to treat the mailmare the same as anypony else, where other treated her as... mentally incompetent (a nice word for it) despite their tolerance for her.

"Dinky!" the purple earth pony exclaimed as the pair drew close, "We've all been so worried about you. It's so nice to see you back, especially after what happened." She drew the purplish-grey filly in for a gentle hug. "Are you doing okay, Derpy?" Cheerilee added, seeing the bandages on the Pegasus' wings.

Derpy nodded with a smile on her face: her wings stung a little, but they were fine nonetheless. "Well, lady there wanted me to come to school really badly. So badly she made funny faces at me to cheer me up a little!"

Cheerilee laughed a little at the innocence of her charge. "Yes, that

sounds like something Derpy would do. She's a really smart pony who loves to see little ponies learn," she smiled, looking to the mailmare warmly. "Don't worry about a thing. I'll make sure she's all right."

The mailmare nodded her head and smiled, nuzzling the little filly gently. "Kelp love tuna, muffin," she wished her a good day. Reluctantly, the grey Pegasus slowly trotted away from the schoolhouse, watching as Dinky walked beside her teacher and inside to begin her lessons anew. It brought a smile to Derpy's face to see such a brave little filly, knowing that at her age she did not even have half the courage the foal possessed.

Suddenly, the trot over to the postal office took a lot longer than she remembered, half of her mind lingering on the schoolhouse. Would she really be okay? What if the other foals were cruel to her? She shook her head as these questions entered her head. Sure, Derpy had saved her life, but had it really grown to the point that she already cared for the little filly as more than a saviour for a distraught survivor? It confounded her, to say the least.

"Derpy, you came in today?" spoke her boss, that grizzle-faced Pegasus known as Boxy Brown. "Well, you missed morning pick-up. Although, Star Chaser called in sick, so if you don't mind, I suppose you could be on the front desk." The grey mailmare nodded her head, accepting the job at the front desk. They usually got out around the time the little ponies at school did, so it worked perfectly for her.

Usually, sitting at the front desk would be one of the jobs she would never do, yet Derpy knew the ins and outs of it simply by observation. Although it required talking, she had long developed a system just in case she ever got put on it. She smiled, as this would be the prime opportunity for her to show she could do any job, regardless of her disability. Then, maybe she could receive a promotion and a pay raise. Sure, she could support two ponies on her salary, but it did not exactly facilitate anything fancy.

Wait, was she seriously thinking about supporting TWO ponies? Derpy shook her head as she arrived at the desk, trying to shake this conundrum from her waking mind. Dinky probably had family in Manehattan or something, and she would be setting herself up for disappointment when the time came to let her go. She simply could not afford to grow attached to her. Not yet, anyway.

Using a series of signals she developed, Derpy expertly directed the questions and concerns of anypony that walked into the post office that day. That is, to say, nopony. The only time a pony would come to the post office for anything would be if they were dropping off, or picking up a package far too big for a mailpony to bring in their saddle bags. Thankfully, the quiet solitude gave her some much needed time to think.

Alas, the day passed slowly for her as her waking thoughts constantly drifted back to Dinky. Sure, it was normal for a pony to worry about such a vulnerable and hurt filly, but quite another to obsess over them. It spooked her somewhat just how much she worried, enough to go out to the schoolhouse on her lunch break just to see her having fun with the other foals. Seeing her relatively happy like that did far better for her than any muffin could ever do, and that was saying something.

The rest of the day progressed just as the morning had. It was with great joy that the wall-eyed Pegasus finally left the post office, heading back to the schoolhouse in a canter. However, upon arriving at the school, the cool, light breeze carried with it echos of a confrontation.

"My DAD said that she was... oh, how did he put it? RETARDED," echoed the voice of a snobbish filly, "Aw, what's the matter, blank-flank?"

"Yeah," her partner in crime chortled. "Your life must really SUCK. You've got no cutie mark, you've lost your parents, AND you're living with the most retarded pony in the country!" Derpy immediately identified the pair as Silver Spoon and Diamond Tiara. Her mind recalled a label applied to them by some of the adults, at least the one unsuitable to be spoken of in pleasant company.

"Ahem," the mailmare cleared her throat sanding right behind the pair. She tapped her hoof against the ground impatiently and met their looks of contempt with one that said 'I know what you were talking about, and I'm not impressed.' Meanwhile, Dinky looked up from her lying position on the ground, eyes still flowing with tears.

"Whatever," Silver Spoon continued, "See you around, blank-flank," they both uttered in unison as they made their retreat.

Derpy trotted over to the sobbing filly and nuzzled against her wet face. "Mingle carp, muffin," she tried to soothe. "Ham loves turnip, and so does Rocky." With a gentle push, the pair walked home in silence, taking time to enjoy the scenery. Deep inside, the words of the two... fillies cut deeply into the mare, if only for the memories that word brought up. It was bad enough being the one called that, but hearing that the pony who saved you is one? She could not even imagine how that must have hurt.

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It was that abysmal day in town history: The Reckoning. Not far from the heart of Ponyville, a grey Pegasus and her unicorn charge sat outside of Mr. Shake's Milkshake Emporium. It was a quiet, bright and early afternoon before all the Sorrel Hells broke loose. Derpy would remember that day well: she and Dinky drank their shakes outside in the open air, sitting across from each other at the modest wooden table.

To be precise, it was the Saturday after Dinky's first day back at school, the trip to the favoured late-spring-time haven a treat for the glowing report Cheerilee gave about her progress. "Oh, Derpy, you're so funny!" the small filly chirped as the mailmares' eyes 'derped' again. The grown Pegasus replied in kind by making some silly faces for her, causing the unicorn to giggle and clap her front hooves together in delight.

Although conversation was not really big between them, considering the adult's disorder, the two seemed to be connecting nonetheless. Dinky had managed to find confidence and happiness around Derpy despite her enormous and recent loss. Meanwhile, the Pegasus had found companionship and a pony quickly growing to mean more to her than anything else in the world. Even if the mayor found her kin soon, perhaps the mailmare could benefit from becoming close to the foal.

However, the calm of the day broke down into chaos and disorder, as events playing out across town came to a head. Just as the pair finished their milkshakes, a loud noise sounded from a distance away, causing the tables, chairs, and even the glass in the shop windows to vibrate dangerously. Ponies screamed and ran as splinters of raining wood fell across the street: the familiar shape of Sugarcube Corner in the distance shattered and deformed. Soon after the initial blast, that awful bell began to toll as Derpy could see the remains of the once iconic building burst into



flames. An unknown streak of lavender shot across the sky like a bullet, leaving the mailmare to wonder what could fly so fast, other than Rainbow Dash.

With no time to think, the Pegasus quickly swept up the tiny unicorn and rushed her down the street to Town Hall. At first, the receptionist looked confused at her sudden appearance, until a wave of understanding swept across the butterscotch mare's face. "Oh, right. I'll look after her," the earth pony receptionist spoke, her voice echoing in the large circular room, "Just be safe."

At that, the door to the mayor's office opened with a slam. The grey-maned earth pony galloped around the hall and down the stairs. "Come on, we don't have a lot of time!" she nearly screamed at the Pegasus, "The fire's already spreading, now go!" Derpy galloped out of the building and took flight to her house to gather her firemare uniform.

From her lofty perch, the wall-eyed Pegasus could already see ponies trying to tackle the flames on the sweet shop, others trying to save what they could from their homes as the flames jumped from one building to the next. Already, the acrid smoke began to fill the skies to choke and blind the Pegasus until she dropped below the plume, nearly flying into somepony's roof.

The streets below were total chaos as the firemare landed outside her door: the ponies here were not exactly known to keep a level head during any sort of crisis. Still, they managed to get by, even if only just. Derpy emerged from her home moments later, wearing her uniform with some measure of pride before taking flight again. Drills had told the mare that her boss, the fire chief, would be talking to the mayor as they formed a plan of attack.

After another somewhat chaotic flight, this time dodging panicking Pegasus ponies as they raced to the town square, Derpy finally arrived to see her boss huddled in a small group around the mayor. "All right," the mayor started. "Big Mac and Caramel: I need you two to evacuate all the foals and elderly and take them to Sweet Apple Acres so they don't get into trouble."

"Eyup!" the burly red stallion replied before he and his friend went off to

do as instructed.

"Sunny," the mayor continued, "Since Rainbow Dash is laid up right now, you are in charge of the weather squad. I need you all to get as many clouds over town, and create as big a rainstorm as possible! Priority goes to buildings adjacent to ones on fire. Move!" With that, the white Pegasus took to the sky with as much speed as she could muster.

"Raindrop, I need you and the other fireponies to put buildings that have just caught on fire as high priority. Sugarcube Corner, for example, is too far gone to save, so don't waste the resources. Hopefully, everypony will have evacuated by then, but I want you to still conduct quick searches, at least at the beginning."

"Yes mayor," the yellow Pegasus responded before she too took to the sky. Derpy immediately followed suit, flying behind the chief. With all the speed of a hurricane, the two quickly descended to a rendezvous point, several other member of the volunteer firepony brigade waiting for them. "All right, everypony," Raindrop addressed. "I want four teams of thirty in all cardinal directions! Priority goes to buildings that have just caught on fire! Conduct quick searches on those front-line buildings only!"

After effectively splitting the Ponyville Fire Department into quarters, the teams broke up to tackle their jobs. Derpy found herself assigned to the western team who would cover the road leading to Sweet Apple Acres. Foals and elderly ponies rushed by as the flames slowly tried to cross the road and block the path. Thankfully, the weather team spotted their plight and brought forward a deluge of rain to help halt the advancing flames.

The rainwater soaked through her coat, and the hose tasted akin to mud, but not quite as pleasant. Derpy strained to keep her moral up, but the more they battled the persistent flames, the more it became apparent that they would lose this battle. No matter what they did, or how much water they used, the fireponies could only slow or stall the advancement of the fires. It was almost as if they had a mind of their own.

Thankfully, for this level of emergency, all able-bodied ponies were conscripted to aid in whatever capacity they could. It was somewhat of a load off of the blond Pegasus' mind, but a great deal of anxiety rested on it nonetheless. Ever since arriving to battle the flames, she had neither seen

nor heard Dinky pass by with the others escaping to the farm. She silently prayed that Dinky had fled before she came to fight the fires.

Suddenly, a shrill scream that the blonde Pegasus knew all too well sounded through the abandoned streets, chilling her to the bone. Derpy literally dropped everything as instinct kicked in: flying off with all haste in the direction the scream had come from. She flew through the air like a rocket, not caring for her own safety as she recklessly dodged between buildings and ponies.

Dinky stood in the middle of a street beyond the firewall, scared and alone, her body pressed to the ground in an effort to cool herself from the roasting flames. How could she have been so careless and become separated from the group? No pony probably realized she was gone, and probably would not until it was far too late.

Flames encircled the cringing unicorn, like a pack of ravenous wolves surrounding a deer. The filly sobbed and cried freely as she began to realize this would be her end. On the other hoof, she would be reunited with her mom and dad again, so maybe it wouldn't be so bad. "MUFFIN!?" came a shout overhead. Dinkys eyes widened as she realized it was the mare who took her in.

"Derpy!" she cried out, hoping she could be heard, "Help me!" Derpy looked down to find the filly in the middle of a ring of fire the likes of which she had never seen. They danced and crackled menacingly as they moved forward, slowly approaching the filly. Wasting no time, the mare dove down after her, the wind nearly deafening her as it blew across her ears.

The ground raced towards her, but Derpy did not dare pull up until she could see each cobblestone individually. The Pegasus rocketed forward out of the dive, hurtling to Dinky with speeds that would make Rainbow Dash proud. In fact, if she did not know any better, she could have sworn she left a hay-coloured trail in her wake. She raced through the flames with her front legs outstretched, grabbing her muffin right before pulling up sharply.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you!" Dinky cried, blurring her words together as she hugged the Pegasus tightly. Derpy hugged her back, heart still racing as adrenaline pumped through her body. All that mattered to her at that moment was the purplish-grey unicorn foal clutched

in her hooves. The mailmare nuzzled against her gently, as the filly had broken down into crying once more.

Eventually, the two arrived at Sweet Apple Acres, the big red stallion greeting them with a measure of worry in his eyes for the filly. "Do you really have to go?" Dinky asked with tears still streaming down her eyes. Derpy nodded her head sadly. She really did not want to leave the filly alone, but the town needed her, and she could not shrug off her duty to the other ponies.

"Crabs bark, muffin," she soothed. "Chipmunks nip at squirrels nicely." The mailmare gently stroked the filly's mane with her hoof, hoping that she understood her promise to keep safe. Without another word, the Pegasus took to the skies once more to battle the stubborn and surprisingly vigorous flames. Knowing that her charge was safe, the firepony could finally concentrate on the task at hoof. However, it would not be until sometime in the afternoon that the fires suddenly gave up the fight: extinguishing as easily as a match.

However, the damage had been done. Derpy and Dinky walked together through the charred and smouldering streets. The clouds overhead continued to rain, just in case the fires decided to reignite. It was a sombre and awe-inspiring sight as the two clopped down their street. It had not dawned on the Pegasus before that her house could have been among the casualties, but the possibility rapidly sprung to mind as she saw ponies dig through the wreckage to unearth any valuables that might have survived.

The streets echoed with the sounds of crying and despair. Derpy kept her head low and pondered: just what could have caused all of this mindless destruction? Dinky could feel the anxiety and sorrow build up in her two-time saviour and nuzzled her side gently as they walked. "It's okay, Derpy," she chirped, "Even if the house is gone... at least we still have each other!" The Pegasus looked to the small unicorn, eyes shimmering with tears at the wisdom and courage she possessed. Derpy nuzzled her back softly, sniffing a tiny bit as they turned the corner.

Standing there was Derpy's house: untouched by the flames that had completely gutted a house not more than three doors down. Walking closer, she found no markings of any kind on the door, telling her that everything inside was just as they left it. A smile crossed her muzzle for the

first time since the explosion... she and Dinky had finally been given a break. Maybe now things would finally begin to look up for the pair of troubled ponies.

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It is simply amazing how fast the sands of time can move, depending on the situation. For some, it feels as if there is never enough time, while for others, it drags on and tortures them mercilessly. Six months had passed since that horrible late-spring day. Flakes of snow drifted lazily to the ground that afternoon, creating a picture-perfect image for any aspiring artist or photographer.

All physical evidence of that terrible day vanished over the half year delay. Sugarcube Corner stood once more in all its glory, and somewhat more beautiful than before. Like a phoenix from the ashes, the bakery celebrated its grand re-opening just before the Running of the Leaves, and experienced an unprecedented surge in popularity since then. Of course, the rumours of that day had reached the ears of the blonde Pegasus.

She trotted through the light snowfall with a measure of pride on her face. Just last week, the mayor had promoted Derpy Hooves to Head Mail Carrier. It meant she could take any route she wanted, morning or afternoon, and secured a paycheque to provide a comfortable living for herself and Dinky. A stream of visible breath left her muzzle as she approached the facade of the bakery. She was so glad that Pinkie had her home back, and that her filly could actually help with something.

The tiny bell jingled overhead as Derpy stepped inside the warm building, wiping the rapidly melting snow off of her hooves before moving inside. "Muffin! Shadows can tuna!" she called out into the shop. A clang of pots and pans met her cheerful greeting, a small unicorn filly emerging from the back room. The Pegasus giggled as she trotted from behind the counter and nuzzled against her.

"Derpy!" she chirped happily, "Pinkie Pie taught me how to make cupcakes today! I was so good at it she might teach me how to make a whole CAKE tomorrow!" Derpy practically beamed with pride at the little filly nuzzling against her, rubbing off some of the flour that shrouded her like a ghost. Moments like this made her glad she chose Pinkie to watch after

Dinky while she was at work.

Speaking of the devil, the pink mare herself emerged from the back rooms. Between the two of them, they must have had a whole sack of flour on their coats. "Hi, Derpy!" she said. "How was your day at work today? Mine was super-dee-duper fun with Dinky here! We made a big mess, but it was still fun because she's just a filly and learning, plus we have a lot of flour anyway so it's not really a big deal if we used a whole lot of it while she practiced."

Convinced her spiel was finished, Derpy answered, "Monkeys flip turnips to chase weasels. Hop on the magic bus, tickets buy you." She blinked as looks of recognition registered across both face.

"Oh dear," the filly spoke, eyes watering at how she slipped and popped her shoulder. "Are you sure you're okay? It sounds like you had a nasty fall!"

Derpy smiled, forgetting for a brief moment that Pinkie was tutoring her in how to interpret her inane outbursts. "Cats bark, muffin," she said, ruffling her little muffin's mane a little, brushing off the flour while she did so. "Chortle lightly, piggy!"

"See you tomorrow, Derpy!" Pinkie waved with enthusiasm as they put on their scarves and walked out the door. Derpy never really paid much attention to the cold, or the heat for that matter. It must have come from years of delivering the mail in both conditions that numbed her against it. Other ponies, however, galloped from one place to the other, wanting to spend as little time outside today as they could.

The pair of grey ponies, however, proceeded through the snow-filled streets at a slight canter, looking in windows of shops as they passed to see what was new for the season. Naturally, if it were not for Derpy, Dinky could very well spend all day gazing wistfully into the window of the toy shop. As usual, the blonde Pegasus had to pull her away after about five minutes of wide-eyed awe over the newest gizmos and dolls they had in stock.

Arriving at home, the two wiped their hooves against the mat and removed their scarves and Derpy her hat before they settled into the living

room. "I wanna continue the story with the fish and the big boat that could go underwater today, Derpy!" Now there was a request the blonde Pegasus would be happy to oblige. Gathering her copy of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* off the shelf, she cracked the book open and began to read aloud.

Dinky lay on the couch beside her and listened intently as a tale of an unlivd marvel echoed through her ears. Granted, some of the words would become garbled because of her lack of prowess at understanding her saviour, but what counted was that she actually read to her. It reminded her of the cold nights her old mom would do much the same for her before bedtime.

They only took a break from the spellbinding tale to eat supper, the story just too thrilling for the blonde unicorn to stop drinking in. It was not until well into Luna's night that the gentle calls of dreamland finally took the filly on the wisps of sleep. Derpy looked to her side and noticed the sleeping filly, probably already dreaming of Captain Nemo and his fantastic machine. A smile crept over her weary face before gently lifting her muffin onto her back and up the stairs. Formerly a barren and cramped spare bedroom, Dinky's room radiated in all different colours of the rainbow, a small collection of dolls stacked against the hoof of her bed, all to calm the filly as she slept.

Gently tucking the sleeping foal under the warm and soft covers, the mailmare offered a soft wish for a good night's sleep before turning out the light. Shutting the door with a soft click, the Pegasus silently fluttered into her room and got herself ready for bed. A brief moment of reflection reminded Derpy that this was not the life she had wanted for herself, but she smiled nonetheless. The creators moved in mysterious ways, often seeming unfair at times... but Derpy could not deny that she had found true happiness for the first time in a very long while.

It only made what happened the next day even more unfair.

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It was cold, the carriage ride was long, and to top it all off, he had to miss breakfast if he wanted to get there in due time. Candid sat in the pony-drawn carriage in utter contempt over his newest assignment. The unicorn

stallion had a coat almost as white as the snow outside, with a dusty brown mane and sea-green eyes. Ponyville was not that far away, but it was not like he was important enough to warrant a Pegasus Chariot. Sure, it would have been colder, but it did not mean he would miss breakfast either.

Normally, the unicorn carried himself with dignity and pride in his work, wearing a tailor-made black suit and tie. Sure, it was part of the uniform for an agent of the FPS, but he made it look good, especially when he added the dark sunglasses to the mix. Of course, he did not feel dignified being carted around in such a decrepit carriage, never mind the fact he nearly lost his non-existent breakfast countless times due to the bumps in the road.

After three stomach-churning hours, the colt from Canterlot finally arrived at the square of Ponyville. He was thankful to step out of the carriage (he really was) but this town screamed 'hickville' to him. No, no, it was probably his mood making him prejudiced. Candid shook his head and stepped away, the carriage moving to find a place to park until his work was complete.

Looking at the brief his superiors had given him, the snowy unicorn moved with celerity through the surprisingly busy thoroughfares of the small town before coming up to one of the larger houses near the square. His horn dazzled in a soft blue glow as he knocked gently on the door. Not more than a moment later, an emerald green earth pony mare answered the door. "Hello, how can I help you?" she asked politely, but with a measure of irritation in her voice.

"My name is Agent Candid of the FPS," he addressed. "You are the same Miss Viridian Gem who contacted us, correct?"

"Oh!" she gasped in recognition. "Why yes, please come in." The alabaster unicorn stepped beyond the threshold of the door, politely wiping his hooves on the mat before trotting into the living room. Meanwhile, the mare continued on deeper into the house, perhaps the kitchen. As far as living rooms went, it was fairly spacious and well decorated, but he was not here to admire the decor. After a couple of minutes, Viridian confirmed his suspicions by bringing in a bowl of lemon drops and some soda.

"Yes, please, and thank you, ma'am," he replied to her kind offer to help



himself to the treats. "I am ashamed to say I was denied breakfast, so your hospitality is most welcome." After helping himself to a polite number of the sour treats, he got back into the swing of things. "Now, let us get down to business. I'm afraid I wasn't given most of the details, so please enlighten me as to why you think Miss..." He looked down briefly to check his notes. "...Derpy Hooves, is an unfit caretaker?"

"Well," the mare started with a tone that nearly made Candid cringe. He knew he was about to hear a long winded spiel and he braced himself for it as best he could. "For one thing, she is developmentally delayed, has a communication disability and... her eyes do the MOST perverse thing ever. No, they don't cross, but they...well, they go off in different directions in some cases."

"I greatly doubt that lazy eyes constitute bad parenting, ma'am. But I must confess the other two are slightly worrying."

"And rightly so!" the green earth pony piped up. "That is why I wrote to you lot in the first place! I trust you are going to do what's right for the poor foal?"

"After a thorough investigation, I assure you, miss," Candid replied honestly. "If you will please excuse me, I would like to get started." He stood to attention, giving the mare of the house a polite nod before taking his exit, making sure he was excused before he did so.

The day progressed much how the unicorn expected it to. In a town as small as this one, Candid banked on everypony knowing each other, at least to some extent. Thankfully, Miss Derpy seemed to be very well known in town, and was regarded as an excellent mailmare and firepony... but in terms of personality, the reviews were less than stunning. Nearly every pony relayed the same story the emerald mare had: that Miss Hooves was mentally incompetent. Even the local medical authorities concurred that, while Derpy was good at working, she was not really all there.

Later that evening, already deep into Luna's night despite the early hour, Agent Candid approached the mailmare's house, flanked by two members of the local police. A carriage pulled by two Pegasus colts, whom he had to charter with his own bits, rested behind them as they walked briskly through the cold evening air. He really hated this part of the job, but

protocol forbade him from communicating with the parents because they would always lie to keep their foals. Reluctantly, he put his hoof to the door and knocked.

A grey Pegasus mare with straw-like blonde hair answered the door. "Jays whisper lightly, pickles?" She blinked, obviously dumbfounded by the sudden police presence.

"My name is Candid, ma'am. I represent the Foal Protection Services. I am afraid we have received some disturbing reports about you from various members of the community. Following an investigation, I regret to inform you that we find you unable to raise a foal. As she is without any kin, we have no choice but to place her in an orphanage."

Derpy's mouth hung open in shock. Had the other townsfolk really said such things about her? Especially knowing who this stallion was and probably why he was there. How could they betray her like that when she had finally found a slice of happiness to call her own!? She hardly noticed as the three colts pushed past her. "Jackal!" she cried, running up to them. "F-f-fire ants... don't like cheese!" As much as she tried to talk normally, her mouth would not co-operate.

"Wait!" Dinky cried as they advanced on her, "Why are you here... and why is Derpy saying she's not funny in the head? I know she's not funny in the head, even if she is funny."

"I'm sorry," Candid spoke earnestly as he got down to the young unicorn's level. "She's not related to you, Dinky, and she can't look after you anymore. I'm afraid you'll have to come with me now."

"No! I don't want to leave! Derpy takes care of me and I don't want to go!"

"You don't have a choice, Dinky." He nodded to the two police officers who picked her up, causing her to wiggle and cry hopelessly in their grasp. The unicorn was always mindful to keep himself between the police ponies and the crying Pegasus as they moved out to the carriage.

"Muffin!" she cried, trying desperately to jump after her once they got outside.

"Miss Hooves," the unicorn spoke, using his magic to keep her grounded, "If you try to go after her again, I'm afraid I will have to place you under arrest." With the crying filly inside the carriage, the police ponies and agent swapped places. Derpy's amber eyes continued to stream with tears as the sharply-dressed unicorn stepped into the carriage as well, causing it to lurch forward suddenly as the pegasi pulling it ran down the street.

"Muffin!" Derpy cried out one last time, waving her hoof goodbye, just in case they never saw each other again. Only when the carriage flew out of sight did the police ponies drop their guard and trot away, leaving her to sob outside in the cold streets. The mailmare was no fool: she knew she had the right to an appeal, and she would pursue it with all her heart. But in order to do so, she needed help... a lot of help, and only one pony in town could provide it for her.

A giggle sounded somewhere beside her, chilling her more than the winter's night ever could. Derpy turned her head to see the sickeningly green neighbour of hers stand outside of her door, obviously amused by the spectacle before her. "I hope this teaches you a lesson, Derpy," she smiled wickedly. "You should have never tried to contaminate that poor, innocent foal with your stupidity. I can only hope the damage you did to her isn't permanent."

Anger unlike anything Derpy ever experienced before coursed through her veins. If only she could rush over and strangle that... that... she dare not say, until her eyes bugged out of their sockets. She wanted, more than anything, to rip, mutilate and kill that disgustingly smug earth pony, and she could probably get away with it too, since everypony thought she was touched in the head.

No! She would have justice, but she would not stoop down to that dastardly mare's level and seek revenge. She would get her muffin back... even if it was the last thing she would ever do!

# My Little Muffin

## Part 2

A rhythmic click echoed through the kitchen early the next morning, reminding him of just how empty his home felt before noon. Ever since the day of her return, Spike noticed something a little... off about his friend and caretaker. It almost seemed like she could no longer trust herself with any magic bigger than a simple levitation spell. Sure, she still went outside and laughed with her friends, but even then, they would be all she would associate with.

The baby dragon sighed and pushed himself away from the table, mentally bracing to give it another try. His claws clicked lightly on the wooden floors as he walked up the stairs to the purple pony's bedroom. Eventually reaching the second floor of the library, he knocked loudly on the right-hand door at the top of the landing. "Twilight!" he shouted. "Wake up! It's almost ten in the morning and you got another letter from the princess!"

Pressing his ear to the door, he heard a moan echo from somewhere beyond, followed by a quiet mumble of cranky disposition as the unicorn beyond regained consciousness. "I already wrote her back, but I'm getting sick of covering your flank for you! Either you write a report soon, or I'm not responding to her next letter, and you can deal with her!"

In the time since her return, Twilight had not written a single report on the magic of friendship to her teacher. It was not like she had not learned anything; she just could not bring herself to do it. Every time she tried, the last interaction she had with her mo... mentor, and the reasons behind it, sprang to mind. The unicorn wandered down the stairs to the lower part of the floor and made her way to the door. "I'm up, Spike! Can you please get breakfast ready for me?"

A scampering of little claws on wood met her ears as the door opened before her in a soft lavender glow. Stepping beyond, the door on the other side of the hall followed suit, allowing her passage into the library's only bathroom. It was a small, yet cozy room that could easily fit a single pony, but no more. A deep soaking tub with a built-in shower sat immediately to

her right, while a white vanity rested to her left. Before anything else, the purple mare went through her usual morning chores.

Not more than ten minutes later, Twilight stepped out of the tub to give her mane a quick brush before going down to eat. Yet, something was off as she looked into the mirror. Staring back at her was a much sadder looking version of herself with a much longer horn and a golden crown upon her head. "AHH!" she shouted, almost jumping out of her skin. With a shake of her head, she looked back into the mirror to see her as she had always been.

"Twilight, are you okay?" echoed the voice of a concerned baby dragon.

"Y-Of course I am, Spike!"

*No, you're not stressed,* spoke a nagging voice in the back of her head. "Stupid eyes," the lavender mare muttered to herself. "Why do they always have to try and play tricks on me?" With another shake of her head, and a quick brush of her mane, Twilight stepped out of the bathroom and walked downstairs. Her little startle had shaken her awake, so she did not mutter darkly under her breath as she entered the kitchen.

Spike sat cheerfully on his little chair, a bowl of cereal already sitting directly opposite of the baby dragon. "So why did you wake me up so early?" she asked as she took her seat. "It's not like any of my friends are going to come over, or that we'll go outside. It's far too cold to do anything for very long." Levitating the spoon to her mouth, the purple mare began to eat.

"I know, and I'd love to sleep in too, but today was the day YOU wanted to re-organize the books!"

"Since when did I..." thinking about it, however, she realized the baby dragon did have a point. She groaned and slumped at the idea of going through every book she possessed, but she had been putting it off for a good month. It needed to get done, and the winter lull was the best time to do it... it might even serve well as her next excuse not to write the princess. Still, re-organizing and cataloguing all the books would take days of hard work with no time to study anything interesting.

However, just as Twilight put her bowl in the sink to wash it, a loud series of rhythmic knocks sounded on the front door of the library. "Pinkie Pie..." she muttered as she walked out into the main room. Pinkie usually never knocked on her door: she just sort of... appeared out of thin air whenever she pleased with no regard for such petty social norms. Her initial wave of annoyance turned into one of worry when soft sobs met her ears as she approached.

"Pinkie, what's wro- Derpy?" the purple unicorn said as she opened the door. Beyond it stood her pink friend who supported the grey Pegasus like a living crutch. Twilight stepped to the side to let them in and get out of the brisk morning air. "Wh...what happened?"

"It's just awful, Twilight!" Pinkie chirruped with no hint of cheer in her voice. "Some fuddy-duddy in town called the FPS and they came and took Dinky away! How could they do that!? Everypony knows Derpy took good care of her despite her strangeness... how could they do something so mean!? Oooohh, I wish I knew who did it! Then I'd do something about all of this, Pinkie-Pie Style!"

Twilight saw a flash of anger in the pink mare's eyes the likes of which she had never seen before. It chilled her to the bone, causing her to shake a little inadvertently. Yet, for all her anger, the party mare carried an air of comfort around her, gently caressing the sobbing Pegasus even as she ranted. It was something truly admirable, and the lavender mare felt she could never split her emotions in two so seamlessly like that.

"So..." she said. "I don't mean to be insensitive, but why are you coming to me? I'm upset Dinky got taken away too, but what exactly do you want me to do about it? As much as it pains me to say so; but I don't think the princess has the time to deal with something like this, as unjust as it is."

"Everypony knows that, Twilight!" Pinkie replied, suddenly happy once more. "Derpy means to sue the FPS for... wrongful conviction, was it?" She twisted her head to the sobbing mare, who only nodded her head in confirmation. "... And she wants the Supreme Court to overrule them finding her as an unfit caretaker." Being the highest public court in all of Equestria, it could overturn any rulings a lesser court or government agency gave. The only higher legal authorities in the country were the Royal Courts of the Regents of Sun and Moon: the personal courts of

Celestia and Luna.

"Okay..." the purple pony trailed off, confused. "I still don't see what you need me for, unless you want me to look up legal references."

"Well, sure, that would help," Pinkie said. "I mean, you are going to be her lawyer, right?"

"What!? Oh no. Oh no, no, no, no, no. Are you CRAZY!?" Twilight huffed. "I can't be her lawyer! I don't have a law degree, large crowds of judgmental ponies make me nervous, and I'd just be really, really awful!" Pinkie's eyes shimmered, her pupils growing to twice their size. The purple mare steeled herself, used to Pinkie and those same sad, puppy-dog eyes that made Fluttershy sing that ridiculous song despite her condition.

She did not, however, expect the brilliant Pegasus to follow suit. Her amber eyes glistened with fresh tears, radiating sadness the likes of which she had never seen. Twilight wanted to help, she truly did, but she just did not have the credentials to represent her friend. She took a deep breath and steeled herself against the onslaught of guilt. "That's not an argument. That's just looking sad and hoping I'll cave in."

Derpy looked to the floor sadly before walking off to a corner of the library, possibly to cry and further guilt the unicorn. Pinkie reached around and extracted a picture of Dinky from the depths of her mane. "Where did you get that?" Twilight inquired. Of course, she quickly realized that asking would lead to trouble and quickly continued. "Never mind... it's still not a valid argument! I just can't represent Derpy. I want to, really, but I don't have a law degree. They're kind of important."

"Aww," Pinkie moaned. "But you were a princess for three weeks! Shouldn't that give you royal authority, or something?"

"That doesn't mean squat!" Twilight shouted, the memories coming back to her once more, making her sound more angry than she felt. "As far as the law is concerned, I don't have any training or authority, so I can't be her lawyer! I'm sorry." At that, the blonde Pegasus returned to her friends, eyes still watering with tears as she placed an open book at the lavender unicorn's hooves. She gave her friend an inquisitive look before levitating the book up where she could see it.

"What is this all about, Derpy?" she asked. The Pegasus promptly pointed to a specific paragraph, urging her to read it aloud. *"By order of King Helios and Queen Kantara of Equestria, no matter the length of rule, any pony whomsoever assumes the duties of either Regent of the Sun or Regent of the Moon will thereafter have authority to preside over, or represent a pony in any and all legal matters."* Twilight groaned and put a hoof to her face. It was a new printing of that particular legal book; therefore only laws still in effect were present. If she did not know any better, she could have sworn it was made *just* to inconvenience her.

"Aha! TAKE THAT!" Pinkie exclaimed, dancing about the room in jubilant triumph.

With the combined might of her saddened friends and the law on their side, the pressure on the unicorn to accept her friend's plea for help quickly became overwhelming. "Fine," she sighed in defeat. Immediately upon accepting, two pairs of hooves wrapped around her neck as the Pegasus and the pink mare drew her in for a small group hug. It was then that Twilight began to wonder just what she was getting herself into.

"So, is there a date set?" the lavender unicorn asked as the hug broke off.

"Not yet," Pinkie answered. "But Derpy said she'll try to get in as soon as possible, so maybe a week or two."

"Monkey flip," the Pegasus spoke. Twilight was relieved to see that she had stopped crying her amber eyes out. "Lemons jog to the beach, but cupcakes swim instead. Germs throw parties over a dog's tail. Oils lick gently at hostile pigeons."

"She said," the pink mare translated. "Not to worry since we have an airtight case. They simply can't ignore all the evidence we have to prove just how super-smart she is! Besides, we plan to get some ponies to act as character witnesses, so they can't ignore her smartness."

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If taking the poor foals was the worst part of Candid's job, then gathering



the evidence to make an iron-clad case against the parents had to be the most tedious. For the past three days, he spent his nine to five going through just about every record agency there was to find in Canterlot. It was times like this that he wished they had the budget to hire runners to do this sort of mindless task while the supervising agent got time to relax and actually prepare.

At about two in the afternoon on the third day, the weary unicorn strolled into the building and up the stairs, his saddle bags bulging with any and every paper he could find that held relevance. He had no time to read any of it, but he had documents from the Register's Office and even staff records from the Royal Equestrian Postal Service. In the interests of fairness, he grabbed every record he could instead of just those that would help their case.

Eventually, the unicorn stallion trudged up to his third floor office. If only the stupid elevator had not broken down, and the owners of the building were not too cheap to bother repairing it, instead of all these stairs. Alas, he had to keep his delusions to himself as he parked his flank behind his desk and emptied the contents of his bags onto the table. With a deep breath and a heavy sigh, the stallion went to work poring over every paper in front of his muzzle.

Granted, such a task was easier said than done. Beyond the thin walls of the entombing cubicle, other agents were doing all they could to distract themselves for the tedium of the day. Often, this resulted in loud, impromptu games of Hoofball using old reports or unused forms. When a pony actually had work to do, it could be quite vexing and extremely difficult to concentrate. Thankfully, Candid had an ace up his sleeve: a sound barrier spell he picked out one day from a library book.

With the spell blocking out most of the noise from beyond the walls of his cubical, the sharply dressed stallion found he could finally concentrate. His cubicle was like most of the other agents': it was barely big enough for a pony to move around in. On the white mobile walls, he had stuck pictures drawn by his own foals, a picture of them and his loving wife gazing at him on his desk. In addition, he also erected posters from his favourite plays and movies in order to give it some more personal flare.

The hours ticked by slowly as he laboured at his desk: reading through

every single document was a tedious and boring task if he ever knew one. Yet, as he read on into the life of Miss Derpy Hooves, the more he became aware that the agency had made a grave mistake. His initial investigation was merely a formality, as they told him they had already looked into her records. Obviously, they had not looked close enough.

Unfortunately, only one pony in the entire building had the authority to issue a pardon to the poor Pegasus. Slipping the papers into a safe place, the unicorn stallion got up from his desk and began the trot to the director's office on the next floor. Near the top of the fourth floor landing sat an impressive set of double doors, dark stained wood casting the rest of the bright room in shadow. A shiver ran down his spine as his hoof made contact with the door: make no mistake, the director seemed like a nice enough pony, he was just...intimidating at times.

"Enter," came his gruff voice after the swift knock. Candid stepped into his office. A single, arched window sat behind a solid mahogany desk. A grandfather clock ticked away the seconds in some unseen corner of the room as the white stallion advanced, the thick white carpeting softening his hoofsteps. Bookshelves lined the walls, serving as a façade of intimidation if he ever knew one. Although, he could not help but notice a tiny nick in the wall paper that imitated wood-paneling.

"Sir," Candid spoke with a nod of respect. "I have some concerns regarding the upcoming appeal of Miss Derpy Hooves."

"Ah yes," the well groomed unicorn said. "What about it?" The director had a large build and a face as if a pony had chiseled it out of raw granite. Everything about him screamed 'big and powerful,' his grey coat, steely eyes and salt and pepper mane only adding to this opinion.

"Well, I've been doing some research into her past and after some thought on the matter, well... I think there was some sort of mistake in the initial investigation."

"Oh, there can't be any mistake," the grey unicorn replied coldly, "You've been working here long enough that I can be--ahem--candid with you." He smirked, but then frowned when his fellow unicorn did not laugh at his joke. "There never was an initial investigation. You did all of it."

"But," he sat there, muttering in disbelief, "We always do an initial investigation into the parent's background before we send out the field agent. Are you telling me that we didn't do that this time? Why!?"

"That is not for you to know."

"When it rips apart a happy and functioning family, I believe I'm well within my rights to ask why there was such a drastic breach of protocol!" Candid did not like where the tone of this conversation was heading, but he felt compelled to press forward, for the sake of justice.

"There can be no happy or functional family when the sole provider of a foal is so stupid she can't even speak properly," his boss replied.

"That's the thing, sir. She can't speak, but she's as eloquent in her written communication as you, or me, or anypony... maybe even more so."

"She probably got a higher-functioning but equally mentally incompetent friend to write those letters for her. The fact of the matter, Candid, is that there was no investigation because there can be no way such an idiotic pony can support a foal!" His last sentence was punctuated by a slam of his hooves on his desk: the director was doing his best to intimidate his subordinate. The white unicorn would have none of that.

"I think I understand what is going on here, sir," Candid ground out, "And quite frankly, I don't think I can live up to your 'standards' here. I'm giving you my two weeks' notice. Or in plainer terms: I QUIT. Have a good day, Mr. Director."

Just as he was about to open the door, the aging stallion coughed and cleared his throat to gain his attention. "I'm so sorry to hear that. I wish you the best of luck in the future. Just be careful, since the world can be so pointlessly cruel, don't you agree?" It took all of Candid's willpower to stop himself from backing up and bucking that smug, bigoted pony in the face. He could tell he was being threatened, but he would not let that stop him. If there was any way at all, he would find a way to help Ms. Hooves with her appeal.

Wasting no more time, Candid opened the door and trotted down to his desk. He would have to go quickly if he was going to get those papers out

of the building, before they could be destroyed. Thankfully, upon arrival, his cubicle was untouched by anypony, so he hastily stuffed the papers back into his saddle bags. Since he was quitting anyway, he left his other valuables at his desk, since they could not legally bar him from the building until the two weeks had expired.

In a way, he would be happy to not deal with the heart-wrenching task of separating foals and their parents. However, he quickly became worried about what he would do for a living now that he had quit. Hopefully another government agency could use his experience... perhaps he could apply to the Royal Investigation Bureau again now that he had more experience? Either way, he never wanted to associate with the director again, and hoped he got his just desserts in the upcoming trial.

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A loud thud sounded all down the street as the familiar sound of the closing door reached the ears of the still sleeping ponies, who reacted with a toss in bed at the most extreme. By then, they had become accustomed to the early riser who dwelt on the lane, and now tuned out her early morning shenanigans. However to Derpy Hooves, today would be the most important Saturday morning of her life.

Weeks of planning and hoping would boil down to just a few hours in a courtroom, as the day of her appeal to the Supreme Court finally arrived. The fog-laden streets of Ponyville stretched before her, obscuring details as her hooves clopped against the cobblestone. Snow piled on the sides of the streets threatened to reach into some of the windows, serving to remind her how far off spring still rested.

Out of the early morning fog, the silhouette of a mare with hair as fluffy as a powder puff emerged from the choking haze. Pinkie Pie did not bother to dress up for the occasion, being her usual free-spirited self, unlike Derpy who put on her best winter saddle. Like the Pegasus herself, it was not over the top: a simple brown outfit stuffed with goose down to help insulate the wearer.

"Good morning, Derpy!" she cheeped. "Are you feeling ready for this?" The pink party mare smiled when the gray mailpony nodded her head positively. After receiving her answer, Pinkie followed her, hopping all the

way down the street. It was good to be around a pony so chipper despite the gravity of the day, or the gripping chill that surrounded it. Of course, it was a well-known fact that the party mare had an infectious optimism surrounding her, like an energy field of some sort.

As usual, the gray mare knocked with her usual musical code to tell her learned friend just who lay beyond the threshold. At first, there came no reply, but right as she was about to knock again, the purple mare beyond bid them welcome. Derpy and Pinkie walked into the library, wiping off their hooves on the mat before proceeding on further into the building. Twilight stood in the middle of the room, levitating a couple of books into her saddle bags.

The gray mailmare found herself speechless at her appearance though. It was obvious that she was aiming to try and impress the judges with a smart appearance, yet she missed the mark. The purple mare wore a pressed alabaster dress shirt with a blood red tie under an onyx jacket and complimented it with a matching pair of trousers. On her hooves, she wore two pairs of equally dark, yet shiny dress shoes.

She even styled her mane into a tight bun and made an effort to try and do something to her usually straight and orderly tail. Derpy was not quite sure what she was aiming for, but it looked more a rat's tail than a pony's. Then, of course, the piece de résistance: a pair of thick brown glasses that enlarged her pupils to a profane degree. In short, she looked like a cross between a bug-eyed librarian (noting the irony) and one of those 'Mares in Black' from urban legends about Rosorrel. Now, the blonde Pegasus was not one to criticise another's fashion sense, but she could not help but laugh.

Even the pink mare got in on the laugh riot, joining the gray pony on the floor in a fit, much to the indignation and embarrassment apparent on the scholar's face. "We're sorry, Twilight!" the pink pony cried in between fits of laughter. "But if Rarity ever saw you like that, you'd give her a heart attack!"

Twilight growled and blushed at the same time. "...But I did everything the books said to make a good first impression!" she defended with a hint of a whine in her voice. Once again, her books had failed to help with a fashion-related crisis, but she did not have the time, or the energy to go see her trendy unicorn friend. However, she became further disheartened when her

retort only proved to make her brainy friend laugh even harder.

Once the tidal wave of laughter finally subsided, Derpy pulled herself off the floor and wiped the tears from her eyes. "Tuna fish," she apologized, "Beaker kicks maple trees in December while flutes play the cello. Rabbits hop happily in marshmallow cakes. Lemon kelps dance on disco ducks."

"She said," Pinkie started, "that you should wear your mane and tail like normal, then ditch the shoes and the glasses. That should make you look decent, instead of over-the-top silly like you are." She smiled as she pulled herself off the floor and shook about to get any dirt out of her mane.

"Spike!" Twilight shouted, causing the grumpy dragon to emerge from the kitchen.

"Yeah?" he answered with a certain level of acidity in his voice.

"Can you please go get the balloon ready while I go fix myself up a little?"

"So someone finally told you that you look like a clown?" The baby dragon shook a little as the mare narrowed her eyes at him. "All right, I'm going." With that, the purple and green dragon left to go prepare the balloon for departure, leaving the grey pony and her translator alone in the room.

Together, the two mares stood in silence for the two or three minutes it took Twilight to redress. There really was nothing to say to each other right then, but smirks across their faces hinted what they were thinking about. Derpy had to confess that the mental image of her friend dressed like that would be one to last, perhaps for the rest of her life, considering just how awful it was.

With all the evidence, a well-read attorney, and the secret well of boundless optimism that was Pinkie Pie, Derpy became confident that she would win this legal battle, hooves down. After all, she had the truth that she was indeed a fit caretaker on her side. By the Sorrel Hells, or high water, she would get Dinky back... if the filly still wanted her, that is. She shook her head at the idea, as if a single shred of pessimism would sink the entire game plan. Unfortunately for the gray Pegasus, they were about to receive a whole cartful of it.

A couple of minute later, the lavender unicorn descended the stairs, her mane and tail back to their usual style, having ditched the shoes and the hilariously thick glasses. After receiving a couple of nods of approval over her new look, she decided to voice her thoughts. "I'm still not sure this is a good idea, Derpy," she said. "I mean, I have absolutely zero experience with the legal system, and I haven't had a lot of time to prepare. I'm just worried I'll make you look like a fool."

Derpy shook her head in reply. "Pickle hats, donkey. Yellow fever and gingerbread tango."

"Don't worry about it, Twilight. There's no way you could make her look like a fool," Pinkie Pie translated.

Immediately after the exchange, the door opened behind them, letting in chilling wisps of mid-winter wind as the baby dragon scampered back into the warmth. "It's all ready to go, Twilight," the baby dragon spoke with some disdain. At the very least, he could get a solid day of napping in while they were in Canterlot. "Good luck, by the way," he wished as they headed out the door.

"Just don't throw any wild parties, Spike," Twilight joked as she shut the door. The three mares trotted over to the balloon and hopped into the basket. Derpy would later learn that the purple and elegant vehicle belonged to Princess Celestia herself. Actually, it explained how the balloon could carry them to Canterlot, regardless of an unfavourable wind, quite nicely. It probably had all sorts of enchantments on it to move to the rider's whims.

For now, the Pegasus watched in awe from the perch of the basket as they slowly lifted off the ground. The buildings and trees of town slowly became smaller the higher they went. Sure, she was used to flight, but the feeling of being so high in the air with her wings folded was downright foreign to her. It was an interesting sensation, to say the very least. In no time at all, the ancient balloon would touch down in the capital of all the land.

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An hour of lazy drifting later, the trio of ponies finally began the descent into the forest of towers and fields of buildings that made Canterlot famous. Claws of ivory and alabaster stretched towards the sky, as if hoping to rip the clouds from their lofty perch. Granted, they were not as tall as the legendary skyscrapers of Manehattan, yet they still impressed upon the Pegasus all the same. She had never been to the capital in person before, and hoped that once the whole ordeal was over, the native unicorn could give them a tour.

Eventually, the basket of the large balloon came to rest in front of, essentially, a large box of a building dressed up with stairs, columns topped by equine heads and windows. The three mares hopped out and dragged the hovering transport over to the parking lot beside the boxy courthouse, garnering a few disdainful glances from the more aristocratic unicorns. After securing the transport to the ground with thick ropes and some pikes, the trio rounded the front of the building and ascended the steps.

A few ponies, still drawn in by the landing balloon, continued to watch as they entered the building, pushing open the large wooden doors. Beyond lay a cavernous entrance hall to rival the castle's in size, but not in luxury. Towering columns of marble supported the vaulted ceiling, each hoof step echoing in the distance for an interminable amount of time. Several smaller doors branched off from this chamber down the hall to the courtrooms, a single large wooden circle of desks blocking the courts.

Twilight took the lead in the march to the desks, with Derpy a close second, and Pinkie too busy playing with the echoes to really notice they had moved on. Sitting at the desk was a brown unicorn mare with an electric blue mane and tail. She sported glasses eerily similar to the ones the lavender mare had worn earlier that day. It took all the willpower Derpy possessed not to laugh at the bug-eyed unicorn. "Yes, can I help you?" she asked.

"Yes," Twilight replied, "Can you tell us which courtroom we'll be heading too? We were only given the time and where the building was."

"Just a moment," the mare behind the desk said. Using her magic, the brown mare cycled through the papers, looking for the room they would need. "Can I have the time? Also, I need the client's name."



"I think it was ten o'clock, and Ms. Derpy Hooves."

"Okay," she added, with some flips and turns of various books and papers, "I take it you're her attorney?" Twilight nodded her head in reply as the mare continued to work. "Aha! Okay, I have it right here... you're due in courtroom three. I wish you the best of luck to you, ma'am. The FPS rarely loses an appeal."

"Thank you," Twilight replied, "Pinkie, come on!" she added, seeing her friend still occupying herself with the echoes of the hall. The trio of mares continued, past the circular desk, and over to the door bearing the number three above it. Marble floors, gilded hanging chandeliers and walls of rich, dark woods gave off a presence of regal intimidation. These halls had seen some of the most monumental cases in all of Equestrian history: some presided over by the unicorn's mentor.

Paintings of important ponies hung on the walls, lit by brass lamps sticking out from the frames to better illuminate the subjects. Most of them had extremely hard or displeased expressions, immortalized in oil-based paint for all to see. Two guards flanked the large doors leading into their courtroom. They were brown unicorn stallions who bore a striking resemblance to some of the royal guard, except they wore blue jackets with gold stars pinned to their lapels.

"I take it you're the plaintiff and her lawyer," one of them addressed Derpy, "But who is THAT one?" he asked, pointing towards Pinkie Pie, who was making faces at one of the portraits.

"She's Ms. Hooves' official translator," Twilight explained.

"Right," spoke the other with uncertainty, "Well, you're about five minutes early. I'll escort you to your waiting room."

"Thank you, Sir," Twilight smiled as the unicorn lead them to a small door aside the large double doors of the court room. The plaintiff's waiting room proved to be uncharacteristically small in comparison to the large rooms all around it. Several small seats dotted the edges of the wood paneled walls, only broken by the odd plant or two in an attempt to bring colour to the relatively tiny and dull space.

The doors shut behind the three mares unceremoniously, the clicks echoing through the empty and hard box. Pinkie Pie, as hyper as always, began to bounce around the room, possibly looking for something to do to kill the time until the trial began. Derpy swallowed hard and took a seat on one of the hard benches after placing her warm saddle onto the rack. As nervous as the mailmare felt, it had nothing on how nervous her lavender friend looked.

Twilight took to pacing the room the very instant the door shut, muttering under her breath various legal terms and words of encouragement to herself. *Calm down, Twilight*, spoke that nagging voice in the back of her head. *Take deep breaths and focus. Getting stressed out isn't going to help Derpy, and you remember the last time you got too stressed. Breathe.* The mare very rarely took the advice of a disembodied voice, but this time, she took it up on its offer, taking many deep breaths, feeling the stress slowly lift off her back.

A far too short amount of time later, the intercom in the room dinged, telling them that the Justices of the Supreme Court had taken the bench. The trial was about to begin. The three walked over to the door and awaited their turn, listening intently. "Fillies and gentlecolts," sounded the voice of a mare over the intercom, "Please rise for the five Justices of the Supreme Court: Chief Justice Black Robe, Justice Powdered Wig, Justice Heavy Gavel, Justice Blindfold, and Justice Balanced Scales!"

Loud shuffling of hooves sounded over the radio as the many ponies in attendance rose to attention. "Please, be seated," spoke a gruff voice, possible belonging to one of the judges. More shuffling echoed over the radio as the ponies seated themselves once more. "The Royal Supreme Court of Equestria hereby acknowledges the plaintiff and her entourage."

# My Little Muffin

## Part 3

The doors to the court opened with a click, a bailiff pony dressed much like the guards outside approaching the grey Pegasus and her friends and beckoned them forward. It was an impressive room filled with intricate and dark wood paneling, etched with elaborate designs that would not look out of place in Celestia's personal chambers. Over a hundred ponies jammed the seats in front of them as they approached the central aisle, all eyes on the three mares.

"Presenting to the court," spoke the stallion after clearing his throat, "The plaintiff, Ms. Derpy Hooves of Ponyville, her personal translator, Ms. Pinkamena Diane Pie, also of Ponyville, and her attorney, Lady Twilight Sparkle of Canterlot." Murmurs echoed through the room as the last name was read aloud. In fact, even Derpy found herself at a loss over the announcement. Since when had Twilight been known as "Lady"? The blonde Pegasus had a sneaking suspicion about what caused the sudden pomp, but now was not the place to voice it.

As they approached the bench---Pinkie's hop thankfully absent---and took their seats at the table, all five of the justices nodded their heads to the purple unicorn as she seated herself. "Lady Twilight," started the pony in the centre, "We understand how you can come before us today with no formal legal training. That said, we will do our best to facilitate you, not out of kindness, or due to perceived incompetence, but out of formality. I hope you do not take offence."

Derpy looked at her friend, noticing a blush the likes of which she had never seen burning on her face. She knew that her lavender friend hated undue attention, or being treated better than others, but she seemed to swallow it as best she could before replying, "N-no, it's fine. Thank you very much, your honour. I'll try to be as small a burden on these proceedings as possible."

After nodding his head in reply, the yellow earth pony stallion sitting in the middle spoke again, "The Royal Supreme Court of Equestria now recognizes the defence and his entourage." The bailiff pony quickly trotted

to a door opposite the one that Derpy and her friends had emerged from. A large and intimidating unicorn stallion emerged from the threshold.

If Derpy did not know any better, she could have sworn the stallion was chiseled from solid granite, and given life through arcane means that made the hairs on her back stand on edge. She shook her head subtly and focused her attention on the second pony to emerge from the door of the defendant's waiting room. The attorney, as she would later learn, proved to be a red Pegasus mare with a light brown mane and tail. She carried a briefcase in her mouth and wore a suit like Twilight's, but with a surprisingly short skirt instead of trousers.

"Presenting to the court," the same stallion spoke after clearing his throat once more, "The Defendant, Mr. Brittle Lullaby, Director of the Foal Protection Services, of Canterlot, and his attorney, Ms. Epona of Ponyclop Ranch." The two ponies proceeded towards their table at a light gait, nodding their heads to the justices of the Supreme Court as they approached.

"Are the two parties ready to begin?" asked the pony in the middle of the bench.

"The prosecution is ready, your honour," Twilight replied with a slight shake in her voice.

"The defence is ready as well, your honour," the red Pegasus spoke with an almost bored confidence.

"Very well," continued the yellow earth stallion, "I now declare this sitting of the Supreme Court in session. The prosecution may begin with its opening remarks."

"Thank you, your honour," the purple mare spoke, standing up and walking before the bench, "Fillies and gentlecolts of the audience, esteemed justices of the Supreme Court, I stand before you today to address a great wrong done to my client by the Foal Protection Services. I intend to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that my client has been wronged by their findings and that she is actually more than competent enough to raise a foal."

Confident in her statement, the lavender mare took her seat at the table once more. As she did so, Derpy could not help but notice the director lean in and whisper something into the ear of his attorney. She, in turn nodded in reply before the justice spoke again. "Does the defence have an opening statement?"

"Yes, we do, your honour," spoke the red mare as she stood to attention, "We aim to prove the FPS' findings to be valid, and assure the decision to separate Ms Hooves from the foal was indeed valid given the circumstances. Now, we have a question we wish to pose to the court. What purpose does Ms. Pie serve? Unless she is a legal advisor, she should not be permitted into these proceedings."

"She is Ms. Hooves' translator, as per our introduction," Twilight replied.

"We have an objection, your honour," the attorney said, "Ms Sparkle, are you trying to prove your case before we actually put it on trial? The presence of a translator ASSUMES that she merely suffers from a speech disability and not from a more severe mental retardation. While neither condition is conducive to proper parenting, the court must determine these matters for itself. We move to have her translator barred from the court."

Derpy saw some of the colour drain from Twilight's face. Obviously, she did not expect the defence to not tolerate the presence of a translator. The blonde Pegasus could see the judge ponies exchanging glances and talking among one another, probably to decide if this argument was valid. She impatiently jabbed the unicorn's side, hoping to coax her out of her mental shutdown. Things were not going as well as she had hoped.

"W-well..." the lavender mare started with great uncertainty, "She has a translator because... because that's the truth! She has a speech impediment."

With a yawn and a roll of her eyes, the red Pegasus looked absolutely bored with the proceedings, seeping a confidence that Twilight sorely lacked. "Next time, Ms Sparkle," she said, "Say 'objection' if you have something against anything I or my client says. Technically, you're out of order, but I'll let it slide THIS time. If Ms. Hooves does indeed have a speech impediment, then show us your PROOF."

Twilight dug into her bags that lay to the side of the table and extracted a series of papers. "Your honours, I do have proof. I have here a series of letters written by my client. I submit these to the court as evidence."

"Objection," the red pony spoke, raising a hoof, "How are we to know they were written expressly by the client and not forged or edited?"

"Sustained," the chief justice replied before banging the gavel, "Ms Sparkle, unless you can prove that your client wrote those letters, we cannot accept it as evidence."

Thankfully for Derpy, the gears in Twilight's head began to turn as she slowly became accustomed to the atmosphere of the courtroom. "I think we can prove it quite well, your honour. I ask the court to call my client to the stand, and request she write an original statement before your eyes. I'm sure you will find the styles to match perfectly."

Chief Justice Black Robe looked to his sides down the bench, the other, silent ponies nodding in approval except for one. "Very well then," he responded, "Ms. Hooves, please take the stand and write for us an account of the day in question. Bailiff, please bring me the submitted letters for comparison."

Derpy stood to her hooves as the bailiff approached and trotted over to the witness' stand quickly. After the letters were given the justices, the brown unicorn returned and delivered her a pen and pad of paper to write on. The Pegasus wasted no time, ignoring the bored yawns of the defence attorney as she elegantly produced a brief synopsis of the events the day her muffin was taken from her.

Once finished, she handed the statement to the uniformed pony, who passed it on to the justices. At first, the previously mute ponies began to murmur and speak among themselves as they decided what to do. After exchanging some quick glances down the bench, the yellow stallion spoke again. "We have found the new statement to match the papers forwarded for evidence in writing style and use of language. As such, we find the prosecution's claim of a speech impediment to be valid. Therefore, Ms. Pie shall not be barred from these proceedings."

Derpy's heart skipped a beat as the judge's gavel made impact with the

bench. She was quickly dismissed from the witness' stand, and managed to catch the shadow of shock on the red mare's face as she gleefully returned to her seat. The blonde Pegasus smiled to her dear friend and attorney, Pinkie doing her best to restrain herself from cheering over their small victory.

"I'd like to congratulate the prosecution," Epona spoke, "It's not every day a pony who isn't even an attorney can totally derail a trial. As great as it is that the plaintiff has proved she has a speech impediment, I remind the court that such a disability holds no bearing on proper parenting. We will accept the court's decision to keep her translator present, but I doubt she will be needed."

Just like that, the air of joy and optimism suddenly shattered like many delicate pieces of china. Derpy was not surprised by how good the lawyer was... after all, they would not have hired a pony who would do them no good. Still, it stung like nothing else as the judge agreed with the red pony and gave her the floor to speak, thus began the trial in earnest.

"Your honours," she resumed after she was given the floor, "I submit to the court the records from the field agent who led the investigation. You will find it contains written testimony from over fifty residents of Ponyville detailing just how unfit Ms Hooves is as a caretaker. You will also find a medical profile that attests to her incompetence."

Every move, every word was calculated and deliberate. It soon became apparent to the blond Pegasus that the red mare was easily one of the best lawyers around, as she had turned the tides of the trial so... effortlessly. Meanwhile, Twilight bumbled and fiddled around in her bags, desperate to find some piece of evidence to prove her mental competence. Derpy could feel their case developing massive holes, and that it would sink faster than the Tandemic unless they could find something to prove her intelligence.

The minutes seemed to drag on for hours, and the hours drag on for days to the diligent mailpony as the relentless assault against her character continued. Even the twenty five glowing character references they had worked so hard to gather were shot down by the defence and the court. No wonder that mare at the front desk wished her luck: they were going to need it if she ever wanted to see Dinky again.

Even after taking the stand, with Pinkie's help, the case did not seem to be going the way she wanted it to. In fact, the grilling comments of the defence and intense pressure on her pink friend proved to be almost overwhelming for her, nearly making her cry in frustration at not being taken seriously. It came as a great relief when the justices announced that it was time for recess.

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"Your honours," Twilight spoke when court resumed after the break, "I'd like to call a witness to the stand, if I may?"

By then, three of the justices looked bored by any pleas the prosecution made. The lavender mare could not help a sneaking suspicion in the back of her mind that they had already made up their minds about the case... and that it would not bode well for her friend. "Very well," Black Robe spoke, "You may call forth your witness." Waiting in the wings, the bailiff pony sprung to action, heading to a door behind the bench.

A sharply dressed unicorn stallion emerged from the back room of the court and sat in the witness' stand. He could not help but shudder as a look from his (former) boss told him that if Derpy lost, his life was about to become a Sorrel Hell. Still, he could not allow this miscarriage of justice to continue. The justices looked at him and asked, "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, with the creators' aid?"

"Yes, I do, your honours," he replied.

"Can you please state your full name and occupation for the court records?" Twilight asked as she approached.

"My name is Candid Camera, and I was an agent for the Foal Protection Services. I have recently, however, quit and forwarded my resume to the Royal Bureau of Investigations. In point of fact, I was the agent in charge of the investigation against Ms Hooves."

"Can you, in detail, explain why you have decided to come before the court and bear witness to these proceedings?" Her voice was a little shaky, the systematic dismantling of their case so far crippling what little confidence she had. She knew showing it was akin to a pony bleeding in



shark-infested waters, but she simply could not help herself.

"Well, when I was dispatched to Ponyville, I operated under the assumption that a background check had been performed by other agents in the service. Later, however, I would learn that no such investigation occurred after talking to the director, Mr. Lullaby himself. I spoke with the pony who contacted us first, then proceeded to gather the evidence that was earlier forwarded by Ms. Epona.

"It was not until I began to gather the evidence for the case, however, that I began to see Miss Hooves in a different light. I gathered as many records as I could in order to help the case against her, but I quickly found that a mistake had been made. You see, I discovered that she has an IQ of well over one hundred and seventy, and that she was the one who suggested the future implementation of the Postal Box system."

The courtroom buzzed at the testimony, and not in an unpleasant way. Although the judges showed no emotion, Derpy could not help but see the looks of surprise in their eyes as they learned of her brilliant idea. Repeated bangs of the gavel brought everypony to their senses as the chief justice called for order. "Do you have any evidence to support this claim?" he added.

"Yes, your honour," he replied, producing some papers, "I have here, Ms. Hooves' school transcripts, and a copy of a personal letter of thanks from the president of the Royal Equestrian Postal Service."

However, just as he was about to pass the paper to the bailiff, the red Pegasus cleared her throat. "I have an objection, your honour. Neither Intelligence Quotient, nor organizing a new mail delivery system constitutes proper parenting. This is simply a smoke screen set up by the persecution to blind the court from the real matter at hand. Personally, I have yet to hear any reason that makes me think she is a fit parent."

"Sustained," Black Robed banged his gavel. It was another nail in the coffin of their case. "The court will hereby disregard the evidence forwarded by Mr Camera. The Defence may now begin cross-examination, if the prosecution has nothing left to add."

Twilight found herself stymied---the red Pegasus had destroyed her

trump card with a simple technicality. Perhaps this really was not such a good idea, and she only had herself to blame for giving in to her friend's demands. She should have told her that she was emotionally compromised and was not thinking straight instead of accepting. Suddenly, she found herself shoved out of the way by the red mare, automatically sitting back at the table.

"Mr. Camera," the red mare paced, like a lion going in for the kill, "Can you tell us why you quit a lucrative career in the FPS over a single case?"

"Well, when I went to speak to the director about my findings, he told me that there was no initial investigation that took place. I have a copy of said report here, if the court is interested in seeing it. Anyway, after he told me this, he then threatened me."

"How did the defendant threaten you? What did he say, exactly? I remind you that you are under oath."

"He told me... that the world can be very cruel."

"Well, I'm sorry to inform you that those words do not constitute a threat. Unless you have an exact recording, the idea that he threatened you cannot be proven, and thus should be disregarded."

"No... I don't have a recording..."

"Then tell us, in your own words, why should Ms. Hooves be allowed to have her foal back?" Epona spoke, raising her voice to show her dominance in the court. It was a primal tactic, the blonde Pegasus noted, but effective. Candid seemed to shrink in the booth, intimidated by the red mare in front of him.

"Um... well, when I arrived with the authorities to take the foal in question away, she looked quite happy in the care of Ms. Hooves, and sad when we took her away, so..."

"Your honours," she interrupted, "If the prosecution can't come up with any evidence to support their claim, I motion we stop wasting everypony's time and move on to deliberations. It is obvious that Ms Hooves is mentally incompetent, just by her choice of attorney... not to mention her peculiar

translator. I think that, coupled with no feasible opposition, proves my client's case more than any evidence I could conjure."

A surge of rage the likes of which Derpy had never felt before flooded through her entire being. Epona could tell they were on their last legs, and went straight for the proverbial kill. It took all her control not to jump from her seat and deck the smug "so-and-so" in the face and damn the consequences. Twilight meanwhile shook in her seat, mind racing to find something, anything to keep the trial going.

Pinkie lowered her head in sorrow. She had done nothing to help all this time and now Derpy was going to lose any chance she had to see Dinky again. She'd love to testify for the court, but that red mare had already managed to bar her from it, saying that attorneys or representatives could not testify due to bias. If she did not think it would hurt the case more, she would have broken down and cried.

"Very well," Black Robe spoke, "As the prosecution cannot voice any objections, we shall begin deliberations." Most of the ponies in the court rose to attention as the five justices filed out, and into the back rooms of the court. The blonde Pegasus was not one of them as a crushing feeling of doom surrounded her. She could tell she was never going to see her precious Dinky ever again. It was just too unfair.

"I hope this teaches you a lesson," spoke the grey stallion, who walked over to her. Until then, he had remained silent, with the exception of a few whispers to his attorney. "No pony has ever successfully appealed a decision of the Foal Protection Services. Not as long as I can help it, and have the money to back it up. The fact is, no matter how amazing your case was, you were going to lose. Do you know why? Because I KNOW you're actually retarded, and that these two," he gestured to her friends, "are covering for your idiocy... why, I have no clue. Enjoy a childless life... Ms. Hooves."

"That... that jerk!" Pinkie spoke in indignation as he traveled out of ear shot, "He's even worse than Black Snooty!"

"Did he..." Twilight realized, "Did he just admit to bribing the judges!? I mean, it was subtle enough to not hold here, but..."

It did not matter to Derpy, her pleas falling on deaf ears. Twilight had said it herself: he did not say enough to incriminate himself. It was like his tongue held a serpent most foul in it: a viper of prejudice and hatred that knew no bounds. An electric mixture of pain, sorrow, anger, and a fourth elusive emotion swirled within, distracting her from the re-entry of the justices.

"Please, be seated," the chief justice spoke, "After careful deliberation and a tally of votes, it is the decision of this court that we rule on the side of the Foal Protection Services. Due to lack of applicable evidence, we have no choice but to declare Miss Derpy Hooves an unfit parent. Case dismissed." He raised his gavel, ready to strike it down and seal the finding in stone. However, before that could happen, something strange happened.

A rush the likes of which she had never experienced before coursed through the veins of Derpy as the finding was read out loud. How dare they refuse to look below the surface!? How dare they assume she was an idiot based on fancy wordplay and the tantalizing glint of an overpriced and overly corrosive lawyer!?

**"OBJECTION!"** she shouted into the highest rafters of the courtroom.

Her ploy seemed to work, buying her precious seconds. "J-j-j-j... just...b-b-because... I... c-c-cannot... sp-speak p-properly," she began, not noticing the jaws of her friends drop, "D-d-does n-not g-g-give y-you the... right to... assume I have... a lack of mental faculties! T-the fact, of the matter... is that I have... spent m-my entire life... being persecuted for being different. T-today is the day... that I say that I have had enough!" She accentuated her point with a swift hit of her hoof to the table.

"I love Dinky. I love her more than... a fresh chocolate muffin... or even more than life itself. I would gladly die... to protect her, and have ALREADY put my life on the line... to do just that! You have no right to call me unfit!" Her whole body rocked as she forced the words to come out of her mouth, sweat dripping profusely from her brow as she concentrated with all her being. Everything was on the line, and for once, she would be heard!

"I swear, by the creators themselves, if you continue to doubt my mental capacities, despite my vehement reprisal, I will go before her highness, Princess Celestia herself, and show her my love and dedication for Dinky!"

Even if I have to sell my very soul, I will get her back! For, nothing in this world can compare... to the love of a mother for her foal! Sure, I might not have brought her into this world, but Dinky was born in my heart, and I was born in hers! If you cannot understand that... if you cannot see the indignation that burns in my eyes, nor the passion in my heart, you are the unfit ones, not I! You are unfit to administer justice at all if you cannot acknowledge the reality of love!"

Laboured breathing soon became eclipsed by the ravenous applause of a pony one-hundred fold. All the ponies in the audience, not used to her inane outbursts, quickly came onto her side after the impassioned speech. Perhaps they could sense the effort and love it took to speak them, but the words resonated in the crowd nonetheless. The blonde Pegasus continued to stare daggers into the eyes of the judges, each pair wide at the unexpected applause.

"Give her back, give her back, give her back..." the chant started, slow at first, but gaining steam the longer the justices remained silent.

"Order. Order!" Black Robe shouted over the crowd, banging his gavel to try and bring silence back to the court. Alas, they refused to comply. "I will have order, or I will eject each and every one of you from this courtroom!" Silence fell, as he banged his gavel once more, his eyes scanning the court for any stragglers to eject. "Ms Hooves, you are out of order, and far too late, as the verdict has passed."

The audience booed before he could finish his thought, causing another angry series of slams of the gavel. "SILENCE!!! LET ME FINISH!" he shouted, taking several deep breaths, "However, despite this, we will take your testimony into account. I, personally, have been moved by your impassioned speech. It is clear to me that you love the filly, and the incident reports reflect the dedication you have just spoken of. What say the rest of you?" He looked to his left, and to his right, observing a couple of hesitant nods.

"Very well then," he spoke, "It is the new decision of this court to repeal the verdict handed down by the Foal Protection Services. Although, you will not receive Dinky until after you fill out the proper adoption papers, as you are not her legal guardian. Case dismissed." A final bang of the gavel sealed the deal. Suddenly, anger, sorrow and indignation turned into

unbridled joy and elation. Derpy almost cheered, before the next pony spoke.

"WAIT!!!" screamed an enraged Brittle Lullaby, "I DIDN'T PAY YOU HAY-SUCKING SODS FIVE THOUSAND BITS EACH TO BLOODY SIDE WITH HER!!!" Everypony in the courtroom stared at him. All of a sudden, what little colour the gray unicorn possessed flushed out of him, turning white as a ghost. "Aw, hayseed." Three of the judges shuffled around uncomfortably.

"Well... we decided to do the right thing, in the end," a pink unicorn mare at the end of the bench spoke softly, "So, you can keep your money." The other two judges who shuffled about nodded their heads, ashamed that they had accepted such a bribe now.

"Bailiff," Black Robe addressed, "Please escort Mr. Lullaby outside. I'm fairly certain the police would like to hear what he just said in more intricate detail."

Smack! A red hoof came into contact with the grey stallion's face as the mare seethed with anger. "How dare you! You called me here, begging for my expertise! How DARE you insult me by buying off the judges when I would have won it for you, colt-catcher!"

Epona had to be restrained by a second guard as the bailiff extracted the now black-eyed former director of the FPS into the back room. It was only then that Derpy noticed the two bodies pressing into her, winding her after her draining rant. She looked to them and sighed, hugging them back. The truth had finally prevailed.

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*Dear Princess Celestia,*

*Today, I did not learn a lesson on the magic of friendship, but something that I think is far more valuable. As you might have noticed, I have not written any reports to you since our last ~~batt~~ meeencounter. You see, it wasn't because I hadn't learned anything, but every time I lifted the pen, our last conversation sprung to mind, and then I would doubt myself and lie to cover it. I'm so sorry that I have failed you again.*

*If you still have the patience to read on, you will find that lesson I told you about. You see, I learned today that the bond between a mother and her foal is one of the most sacred things in this world. Through it, both ponies can achieve impossible goals, or shatter barriers between them, all in the name of their love for each other. I suppose it can explain how I've finally gathered the nerve to write you now. Ha, ha.*

*Seriously though, I bore witness to a mother defending her right to be with the filly she loves, despite the world being against her. I'm sure you might have read about it in the papers by now, but let me assure you that no journalist can summarize what happened. The mother, normally unable to speak in naught but inane outbursts... the pony who taught me about judging a book by its cover and not to think I'm the smartest pony in the world, managed to shrug off her life-long speech impediment in order to show that she was competent.*

*I feel blessed to be able to say that I saw this first-hoof. That I felt the passion and the love radiate off of her like a magic I have never felt before in my entire life, except once...with you. Although, I don't feel I've earned the right to be called your daughter, not yet anyway. I have a lot to make up for, and not a lot of time to do it in. Can you ever forgive me for hiding from you all this time? I await your response, and hope we can resume dialogue as we used to, before the unpleasantness.*

*Your faithful student,*

*Twilight Sparkle.*

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A tall, handsome grandfather clock ticked away the minutes and hours, as it had done for years previously. Today, however, the hands swept across the circular face at a cruel snail's pace. The largest hand rested above the number eleven, while the smallest neared the three. Derpy Hooves paced the floor of the hall impatiently, for she was about to hear a knock on the door. Little did she know just who exactly it would be as that knock came a full five minutes before expected.

*They're early,* she thought as she trotted over to the door. A flood of

excitement cascaded through her entire being, only to be flushed away in an instant. Standing on the other side of the door was none other than Viridian Gem: the hateful pony who caused the entire mess in the first place. It took all of the control she possessed not to slug her in that instant.

"Um... Derpy?" she said, "Listen... I heard about the trial... about what you said. Um... you can buck me, if you wish, since I deserve it. I just... wanted to apologize for, well, misjudging you. It was wrong of me to accuse you and do what I did when I should've seen you only wanted to make Dinky happy. I understand... I understand if you can never forgive me, maybe even hate me. Still... I'm sorry."

She took a deep breath, causing the green earth pony to cringe in sickening anticipation. The blonde Pegasus walked over to her, and gently placed a hoof on her back. "It's fine. Monkey flop," she smiled, forgiving her transgression. It was harder to forgive than to be angry, but she had done something harder still two weeks ago. Breaking her disability allowed her the ability to speak normally... but only if what she had to say was really heart-felt.

"T-thank you," she stammered, tears streaming down her cheeks, "It's... more than I deserve. See you around, Derpy." With that, the green mare left her alone at the door, the Pegasus shutting it before the winter coolness could invade her home. If that pony could have redemption, she mused, then there must be hope in the world, hope that things could improve.

Another knock sounded on the door moments later, just as she was about to seat herself on her couch and read a book. With a deep breath, she approached the door and opened it, to let in the chill once more. Beyond the threshold stood a warm and well-dressed unicorn mare, obscuring the view of a large carriage behind her. She had a peppermint green coat, and a tidy mane of raspberry. "Ms. Hooves, on behalf of the new director of the Foal Protection Services, I'd like to issue you a full pardon... and something even better."

Slowly, the green unicorn stepped aside, allowing the Pegasus' eyes to come across the most beautiful sight she had ever seen. Standing beyond was a purplish-grey unicorn filly, her mane a hay-touched blonde, her amber eyes dripping cold tears onto the frozen cobblestones. "Mommy!"



she cried, rushing forward to hug the Pegasus tightly, nearly cutting off the circulation to her leg.

The unicorn silently bowed out and returned to the carriage which unceremoniously took off moments later. With her free leg, the mare shut the door and carried the filly into the living room. "I missed you so much, mommy! That place was cold and dirty and strange grownups kept trying to take me away, but I wouldn't let them because I KNEW you would come and get me, mommy. I just knew it. I love you so much... please don't let me go away for that long ever again!"

Derpy knew Pinkie had planned a party for them that would start in a few minutes... but she did not care. She held Dinky, her now legal daughter, close and snuggled her tightly, making a silent vow to never let anypony separate them ever again. The pair nuzzled each other and simply held together for many long minutes, drinking in each other's warmth, love, and closeness.

"Never, my little muffin," Derpy soothed her filly, "Momma loves you so very, very much."

*--The End--*