

# Duties

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# Prologue, Part 1

## Coronation

*Celestia...*

The Princess of the Sun found herself surrounded in a white void. A presence could be sensed by her, so strong it was almost tangible.

“Who is there?” Celestia called out. There was not a soul to be seen from the looks of things.

*Celestia, Princess of Equestria...it is time for you and Luna to find them. The order of the world has deemed the time for change to be now...*

An expression of understanding dawned upon her features, a sudden feeling of humility washing over her. “I...I see...” She bowed as low as possible for a pony of her stature. “We shall begin our task immediately.”

*Very well, Celestia. We will place our faith in you and Luna. Thank you.*

Celestia got to her feet and nodded. Then her vision went dark.

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Celestia’s eyes opened as she looked to the ceiling of her bedroom. The dream was still vivid in her mind, as though it had been a flesh and body experience. She slowly crawled out of her bed and yawned before looking out the window. The moon was still hanging in the night sky, but the prodding sensation in the back of her mind told her to set about her main duty as a princess of Equestria. Celestia stretched a bit before walking out to her balcony, her mane flowing behind her as she felt the cool spring air gently brush against her face.

She pointed her horn to the eastern sky, and focused her energy on the horizon. Rays of light slowly stretched across the darkened sky, oranges and yellows beginning to bleed together as the shining, celestial giant appeared.

With the sunrise in motion, her main task for the day was complete. Her magic would be able to run its course without her supervision, leaving her to attend to other important matters.

After grooming her mane until it shined in the early dawn's light and placing her golden crown and regalia on, she made her way out of her chambers and towards the throne room. She greeted two of her Royal Guards who bowed deeply before opening the doors to the chamber. Just as she had predicted, Luna was sitting in her throne, cushioned by a dark blue pillow that matched her own fur coat perfectly. She got up from her seat and made her way to Celestia, greeting her with a nuzzle.

"Good morning, Celly."

Celestia felt a warm smile spread across her face at the sight of her sister in such a chipper mood. "Luna, how was your evening? I saw a little bit of Aurora Borealis last night, but I was drifting off around midnight, so I'm afraid I couldn't stay up for the whole thing."

Luna grinned while falling into step with her sister as they walked about the throne room's length. "Oh, it was quite peaceful, really. A few representatives from Manehattan made a late visit, and I was happy to give them an audience concerning the construction of another loading dock on the East River. I thought it was a wonderful idea, what with the boats coming in all the time. It will allow for greater importing and exporting, and allow for more ponies to use the waters.

Celestia felt a bit of pride well up in her. Luna had slowly become more and more involved in Equestrian life once more, and it made her happy to no end to see her little sister being able to give some contribution to the kingdom. "Wonderful, I was wondering when they were going to get on that project." She leaned close to her sister, and whispered softly. "I'm guessing you had the vision too?"

A look of perfect understanding fell upon the midnight alicorn's features. "Yes...I'm a bit surprised that it's happened so soon, though. It's only been...three to four thousand years since we took reign, hasn't it?"

"More or less." Celestia agreed. "I'm not sure *who* will be the next generation, but...I have an idea of *where* we are supposed to go."

“Ponyville.” Luna stated, not a slight hint of hesitation in her voice. Celestia could only smile and nod. “I wonder...do you think that *they* are the next ones?”

It was easy to hear the hopefulness in her sister’s voice. “Quite possibly. We’ll simply have to go there and find out. I must admit, I’m thankful we’re not being directed towards several locations at once. That would be quite confusing.”

After a light breakfast (or dinner in the case of Luna), the two informed the castle attendants and guards that they would be going to Ponyville in regards to ‘business of the utmost importance’. Four guards tagged along with the two regal sisters, if only to help with the possible need for crowd control. The two had decided on getting some exercise and stretch their own wings a bit. It took a great deal of convincing for the chariot teams to allow this, but they eventually caved in and let the two fly on their own.

“Celestia, did you inform Twilight or the mayor of Ponyville that we were visiting?” A small smile crept across Celestia’s face, causing Luna to frown. “Celly, you’re not planning on surprising them with this visit, are you?”

“Maybe.” Celestia replied. The sing-song tone of her voice set off an alarm in Luna’s mind. Celestia was being mischievous, and if there was one thing Luna could remember learning in her days as a filly, it was that Celestia and mischievous made an unpredictable combination to deal with.

Luna sighed while giving her sister an exasperated look. “Honestly, sister, you’re more than three thousand years old, yet you act like a little foal with these pranks you pull. You *know* how ponies act when we pay them such visits.”

Celestia giggled. “I know, but Twilight Sparkle’s simply adorable whenever she gets frazzled up anytime pay her a surprise visit.” She looked off as though reminiscing on some memory of hers before continuing. “Besides, it will give us both a chance to see Ponyville on a normal day.”

The Princess of the Night couldn’t argue that point. It had been more than a year now since she had returned from the moon, and she was already seeing that some things were still the same in Equestria. Ponies

revered the two like living deities at times, and while it was flattering, if not a bit disturbing, for Luna and Celestia, they both sometimes wished to just simply relax and be casual with their subjects.

“If Twilight starts hyperventilating I’m putting full blame on you, then.” Luna stated with a shake of her head.

“Very well. If Fluttershy starts blushing before fainting upon seeing you, I’ll place the blame on you.” Celestia replied without missing a beat, a small smirk on her face. “Have you and her visited each other as of late? She sent you a letter recently if I remember correctly, and it seemed quite long.”

Luna blushed deeply before turning away. She was thankful that they were passing through a few cumulus clouds so that she could hide her embarrassment. “Fluttershy and I have become good friends if you must know. She has a wonderful singing voice and a love for the nocturnal flora and fauna as well.” She glanced over to see Celestia giving her a knowing smile. “S-stop reading into things, Celly!”

Celestia simply laughed to herself before dropping her gaze to a collection of buildings dotting the land ahead. “Ah, looks like we’re almost there.”

Sure enough, within a minute’s time they had approached the outskirts of Ponyville. The two alicorns and four pegasi guards circled the small pony settlement once before landing in the town square. Ponies all over stopped whatever they were doing, some gasping in surprise while others began whispering to those near them.

“Greetings, my little ponies.” Celestia spoke, her voice carrying a calm yet powerful and confident tone, not in the least bit put off by the nervous glances she was receiving. “Please do not worry, this is an unannounced visit. My sister and I are here on sudden business regarding the kingdom, but do not let this stop you from whatever it is you were doing.”

The reply she received was several long moments of reverent silence before ponies hesitantly began what they were doing once more, though most simply continued to gawk, albeit more discreetly than before. She rolled her eyes while smiling, then turned to two of the guards escorting them. “Swift Heart, Stormy, if you two would be so kind as to inform the

mayor of our arrival, it would be greatly appreciated. I'm sure she'd like to know that we are in town so she won't hear rumors later from other ponies and put herself into a panic."

"Yes, Milady." replied the two pegasi with deep bows before they trotted towards the direction of the town hall.

"In the meantime, Fair Breeze, Captain Lily Wing, I would like you two to go to the Ponyville library and inform Miss Sparkle of our arrival as well, and that we will likely be stopping by to visit her later. Please...try not to be too intimidating about it if you would."

Lily Wing, a pegasus pony who appeared to be only a few years into marehood, spoke. "I...well, your Highness...while I don't mean to go against your orders, are you certain that you're fine without either of us to guard you or Princess Luna?"

It was Luna who decided to speak. "We'll be fine, Captain. Ponyville's a relatively peaceful community, after all."

"If that is what you wish, your Highness then-"

"Oh, Princess Celestia!! Hi, remember me? I'm Pinkie Pie! My tail started twitching and my back legs started wobbling while my left eye started itching, so I just *knew* someone important had arrived in Ponyville, so I had a hunch it was you and-" Pinkie Pie's eyes widened suddenly before she let out a gasp. "Ooooh! Princess Luna, is that you?? I haven't seen you for a long time! How are you? Have you been given a tour of Ponyville yet, because if you haven't I think I should give you one because if you don't know the place then you could get lost and..."

"I...er, well, Pinkie Pie, I wasn't..." Luna tried to find her voice, which Pinkie Pie was oblivious to at the moment.

Lily Wing leaned towards the elder princess. "Your Highness...again, are you certain that we should leave your side?"

Celestia chuckled quietly, due in part to the expression of confusion Luna had on her face, while also enjoying the bright atmosphere that the bubbly pony seemed carry about her at all times. She could feel the Element of Laughter flowing out of her like a fountain of mirth and good-

natured mischief. "Yes, Captain. Pinkie Pie is a friend of Twilight Sparkle's, and I know for a fact that she is a good pony. We'll be quite fine."

"If...if you say so, your Highness." Lily Wing and Fair Breeze reluctantly made their way towards the library while throwing concerned glances over their shoulders towards the pink party pony every couple of steps.

"...and then Applejack told me that cider and apple juice aren't necessarily the same thing but I drank the whole bottle anyway. I got a little dizzy after that but I still had a fun time at Big Mac's birthday either way. Not sure if I'll ever drink it again anytime soon, though. It wasn't as sweet as apple juice."

Luna gave Pinkie a confused look, still trying to process everything the bubbly earth pony had said. "I...see..."

"So, what are you and Princess Celestia doing here in Ponyville? Wait, I know, you're on super important princess business, aren't you? Oh, can I help?"

Princess Celestia lowered her gaze to meet Pinkie's, her horn glowing slightly. Her eyes widened a little as she smiled brightly. "Actually, Pinkie Pie, you're part of the reason we're here. Would you mind tagging along with us today?"

"Oh, I get to help? You really mean it? That'd be super-duper!!!" Pinkie beamed.

Luna looked to Celestia before closing her eyes and channeling magic into her own horn for several moments. When she opened her eyes they were shining with an expression Pinkie couldn't quite peg. The princess appeared to be happy, though she wasn't sure why. "I agree with Celestia, Pinkie Pie. It would be wonderful to have you tag along with us."

Pinkie's smile fell slightly before she raised an eyebrow upon seeing the younger alicorn imitate her sister's actions. "So, what super-important princess stuff are you doing in Ponyville?"

Celestia gave Luna an inquiring look, and the younger alicorn only gave a nod in reply. The Princess of the Sun leaned close to Pinkie and



spoke softly into her ear. Pinkie's eyes widened to the size of dinner plates before she looked up to Celestia. "R-r-really? M-me...y-you're serious??"

Amused by the pink pony's rather uncharacteristic response, Celestia cracked an amused smile while nodding. "Yes, and I honestly think you're a wonderful choice."

The pink earth pony seemed to reach her limit as she let out a squeal of delight before her eyes rolled into the back of her head, ending with her fainting. Celestia caught her using magic, and levitated her gently onto her back. "Well, I guess even Pinkie Pie can be overwhelmed at times."

"Oh dear..." Luna looked worriedly to the frizzy maned Spirit of Laughter before sighing deeply. "I just hope whoever else we find doesn't react the same way. I'm not sure how many we can carry with us."

Twilight Sparkle was surprised when she answered the door to two Royal Guards. The apparent captain had informed her that Princess Celestia and Princess Luna were in town on rather important business and that they would probably be visiting later on during their visit to Ponyville.

After they left, Twilight found herself frantically cleaning up the library as best as she could. Spike had taken the day off to go fishing with Big Mac and the Cutie Mark Crusaders, so he wouldn't be back until later on this afternoon. Owlowiscious was sleeping and wouldn't be awake until sunset.

"I really need to get this place organized properly..." Twilight grumbled as she looked at a colossal stack of books that arrived a week ago from the Canterlot library. She had yet to take the time to shelve them, and without Spike or Owlowiscious around, the task proved to be a bit arduous for her. Not to mention organizing meant moving books around, which also caused dust to be disturbed in some of the higher shelves, and thus prompt the unicorn into a sneezing fit.

"Geh...ga-aaaachhoo!!" The lavender unicorn sneezed so hard she ended up on her haunches, rubbing her nose while groaning in annoyance. "Gah...stupid dust..."

About a half hour into organizing her library the sound of someone knocking at the door.

Twilight froze in place before slowly turning her head towards her front door.

Oh no! What if it was Princess Celestia or Princess Luna? The place was a total wreck, she couldn't let them see this!

"Twilight? Twilight Sparkle, are you there?" called out a soft voice. It wasn't like Celestia's, which carried an air of wisdom, but a voice full of youth and mystery. She felt like she had heard it before, and curiosity drew her towards the entrance. She opened the door, her eyes widening before she bowed.

"P-Princess Luna! I-I heard that you and Princess Celestia were in town, and I was in the middle of organizing the library! I apologize for this horrible mess!" The lavender unicorn, still bowing, could feel sweat forming on her forehead, trying to find a way to explain the current state of disarray that the library was in.

"Twilight...it's quite alright." Luna tried to stifle her laughter at the sight of the dust-coated pony. Twilight Sparkle was visibly trembling before her, and still stumbling on her words as she attempted to find a way to explain the chaos that was the Ponyville library. Luna decided she needed to calm the scholarly mare's nerves if she planned on getting any further with her.

Twilight felt a gentle hoof on her shoulder. She looked up to see Luna's horn glowing a soft yet steady blue color. There was a flickering light in the alicorn's eyes that matched her horn's aura.

"Princess Luna...is something wrong?"

Luna simply shook her head. "No, there isn't. Far from wrong, in fact." Luna gave Twilight a low bow.

"P-Princess Luna, what are you doing? Please, you shouldn't be bowing to-"

Luna giggled a bit before rising to her full height once more. "It's alright Twilight Sparkle. My sister and I are here in regards to something *incredibly* important."

"How important?" Twilight asked, unsure if she wanted to know the answer. Was it something dangerous? Something that would require her

services? She was ready to serve the princesses in a heartbeat, but the tone in Luna's voice was a bit eerie. Probably a part of that whole cryptic air that she carried with her, Twilight surmised.

"Well...we do know this much. What we do today will affect the future of Equestria, as well as the entire world."

"Oh..." Twilight stated profoundly.

The Princess of the Night just laughed. "Come, Twilight. I'm suddenly being pulled towards that fancy looking boutique down the road, and I think I know why."

"Now, all Ah'm saying Rainbow is that this ain't the proper way to go 'bout paintin' a wagon!" grumbled a hat-wearing earth pony mare. She was currently studying, with a certain degree of disgust, a cart wagon used for hauling produce to and from market. "Wagons are supposed to be *red*."

Her chromatic-maned pegasus friend failed to see the reason for the disgust, unfortunately. "Says who? This wagon looks a hundred times cooler!"

"...Rainbow Dash...you painted it every single color of paint we had in the barn, An' are those flames on the side? This has got to be, by far, the most outrageous lookin' bit of farm equipment I've ever done laid eyes on."

"Exactly! It's going to be the best looking wagon ever! Have you *ever* seen a cooler looking wagon than this? Now, all we need to do is get an awesome spoiler to put on the back and-"

"A spoiler? Son of a billy goat, Rainbow Dash, this is a wagon! A *wagon*, not some race cart that you make at the boxcar derby durin' fillyscouts!"

"Fine, fine, I'll paint red over it...though it still would have looked cooler with the flames."

Applejack was about to make a retort when she noticed a small group of ponies coming their way. "Hey...Rainbow, ain't that Princess Celestia down the road there?"

Rainbow Dash looked up from the paint bucket and squinted a bit, recognizing the shimmering colors of dawn belonging to the mane of the

Princess of the Sun. "Huh...yeah, yeah, that *is* Princess Celestia! What's she doing here, though? It looks like Pinkie Pie's with her too, along with a few guards." Her eyes widened before she felt a small pit form in her stomach. "Oh hayseed, don't tell me that pony got herself in trouble with the Princess!"

The two mares made their way down the road leading out of Sweet Apple Acres, meeting the royal sister halfway and bowing as they neared her. They decided to play it cool, hoping that this visit was for a positive reason, and not an arrest.

"Boy, it's a pleasant surprise seein' you here, Princess Celestia. Wish you would've told me you were comin'. I'd have made enough apple dumplings and carrot stew for you an' the others if that were the case."

Princess Celestia gave a shake of her head. "That's not a problem, Applejack. I came here unannounced, so there was no way you could have known." She stared up at her glowing horn, which began glowing brighter. She walked past the ponies, and then turned to her left, then her right, and then faced the two mares once more before smiling as she looked up to her horn. "Well, it seems my prediction was correct." She looked to Pinkie Pie, whose eyes were lighting up while looking to her to friends.

"Oh! Princess Celestia, does that mean they also...?"

The ancient pony gave a simple nod.

"Waaahooo!!!" Pinkie Pie's began cheering and bouncing around the two confused mares and the two Royal Guards that had returned from the town hall.

Applejack decided to try and get the pony's attention "Pinkie..."

*"...and now I got my friend's by my side, through thick and thin we'll keep things in order and-"*

"Pinkie Pie..." No luck from Celestia either.

*"...we'll do the best that we possibly can, because we're the best of friends and-"*

"I got this." Rainbow Dash cleared her throat. "Pinkie, there's a goose on the loose!"

Pinkie paused in mid-bounce and gave Dash a weird look. "Huh? A goose on the loose? Ponyville doesn't have any geese nearby, though, we do have lots of ducks..." She scratched her head. "You sure they aren't ducks, Rainbow Dash? I mean, I could see someone getting the two confused. Like, one time, my older sister had to go pluck some feathers for Granny Pie for a new goose down pillow, but all the geese were too fast so she-"

"Pinkie!" the cyan pegasus shouted, snapping the earth pony out of her trip down memory lane. "Sorry, I had to get your attention. There's no goose."

Pinkie Pie frowned a bit before landing on the ground. "Oh. Darn, I was hoping we could go on a wild goose chase, too."

"I...ugh..." Rainbow Dash shook her head. "...okay, I admit I walked right into that one." Rainbow sighed before looking to Princess Celestia. "Um...yeah, anyway, what is that you needed, Princess Celestia?"

The white alicorn stood up to her full height while gazing down at the two mares with a smile that hinted mischief. "That's for me to know, and for you to find out shortly...at least as soon as I find out if Luna's found the others that we sensed here. I'm pretty sure I know who they are, too."

"Why not just tell us right now?" Applejack asked.

"Because, it's a surprise, silly filly!" Pinkie Pie answered, bouncing in place.

"Pinkie's right. It's a surprise, and I hate ruining surprises for my little ponies. Now please, girls, if you would be so kind as to follow me." Celestia answered before continuing in another direction, Pinkie Pie following close with the guards flanking either side of them.

Rainbow Dash and Applejack were soon following the rest of the group, trailing behind a little while murmuring to each other.

"What do you reckon' this surprise is all 'bout, Rainbow?"

"I don't know...but I'm starting to worry about what would happen if Pinkie Pie and Celestia decided to pull pranks on other ponies."

The two felt chills run down their spines. No, pranking of that caliber was too great for any pony to experience.

“Oh my, you look simply divine, Princess Luna. This outfit would be perfect for next year’s Gala, assuming that you want to attend.”

Rarity circled the small platform that Luna was currently standing on. Mirrors surrounded the alicorn and fashion designer on all sides, and several lights were angled so they shined directly on the midnight pony. The princess had a baby blue dress on with sapphires and white gems embroidered into the fabric, ending with wavy frills and lace. Luna continued to stand in place with an embarrassed smile while Rarity to looked her over.

“What I wouldn’t do for a figure like yours, your Highness.” The fashionista sighed while looking to other unicorn present. “Twilight, dear, what do you think?”

Twilight, who had been paying most of her attention to the slightly embarrassed princess pony, blinked before frowning. “Um...I’m not sure if I’m one to consult on fashion, Rarity. I think you know that better than most-”

“Oh please, Twilight, you don’t give yourself enough credit.” Rarity smiled while waving a hoof in the air. “Yes, you can go a bit...overboard with things, but I *know* that you can at least tell when something beautiful is standing before you.”

“Well...” Twilight looked to see Luna staring at Twilight, her cheeks failing to hide the blush on her face. “Yes, she does look pretty. I will have to agree with Rarity, Princess Luna. You look amazing in that dress.”

“I...well, Rarity, I love this outfit, but I didn’t bring any money to pay-”

“Nonsense, Princess Luna. Consider it a gift from one friend to another.”

Luna’s expression morphed into one of surprise as she began shaking her head. “Oh no, I couldn’t do that. You have to make money somehow, don’t you? I couldn’t possibly take this dress for free, especially when it’s so elegant and comfortable.”

Rarity just smiled while taking a slight bow. "Then consider your compliments payment for it. I made that dress on a whim one night while I was having a creative streak run through me. Considering the moon and stars were my inspiration, I feel it rightfully belongs to you."

Luna frowned, but realized that this was one argument she wouldn't be winning. "If you insist, Rarity. Thank you very much."

"Of course, of course. A pony with such a stunning mane like yours needs an equally stunning dress to go along with it. I could probably make a few improvements along here...maybe a slit on the right side...oh, Princess, if only you weren't so busy with your duties. Photo Finish would have a field day with you."

"Y-yes, speaking of duties, I wanted you to come with me and Twilight. We have a most pressing issue that needs to be taken care of, and my sister is looking for the other ponies that will be involved with this I can imagine."

Rarity gave a nod before taking off her sewing glasses. "If you insist, Princess. What was it exactly that you wished to have us do, by the way?"

"I was about to ask the same thing, actually. While I don't mind helping you and Princess Celestia, your Highness, I am curious as to what exactly this task of yours entails." Twilight Sparkle chimed in.

"Ah, well, I could tell you right now, but I think it'd be best if I wait until I find the final pony that I came for. I think my sister has found the last of the ones she was meant to seek out, and my magic is directing me..." Her horn began glowing brightly as she gracefully hopped off the platform and began to walk towards the door. "...this way."

"Well, if that's the case, would you be willing to take off the outfit first? I'd hate to see such a wonderful dress be ruined by a possible dirt stain or stray twig.

Luna snapped out of her trance and looked sheepishly to Rarity. "Oh, yes, I think that's a good idea, Rarity."

After getting out of her dress, Luna lead the two unicorns to the outskirts of Ponyville, over to the edge of Everfree Forest where a small cottage was nestled. Luna visibly brightened up with joy as her horn began

give off a more powerful glow. “Oh, I *knew* she’d be among them! Come on, we’re almost done!”

Luna knocked gently on the wooden door of the small cottage. Hooves walking across a wooden floor could be heard on the other side, followed by a latch unlocking. Two round, deep cyan eyes peeked out between the crack in the door. “H-hello?”

The midnight alicorn smiled warmly to the pony behind the door. “Good afternoon, Fluttershy. I hope I’m not interrupting anything. Would it be okay if I come in?”

Fluttershy’s let out a small gasp before smiling. “Princess Luna, hello!” Her meek demeanor was quickly replaced with elation and genuine happiness. “I wasn’t expecting any visitors and...oh, hello Rarity and Twilight. It’s nice to see you two as well.” She opened the door all the way and took several steps back. “Please, come in. I was just helping Angel finish making some carrot stew for a few sick little bunnies. If you don’t mind waiting in the living room until I’m done, that would be wonderful...if you’re okay with that.”

Luna gave a nod. “That’s not a problem, Fluttershy...” She suddenly looked over towards Ponyville and smiled. “I hope you don’t mind, but I think my sister and several other ponies are heading this way. I sense...” She closed her eyes for several moments before opening them. “Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, and Applejack with her, and four of our guards. Is...that alright?”

Fluttershy grew silent for several long moments before speaking softly. “Oh...um...I guess that’s okay...” Princess Luna, who was a rather gentle soul like Fluttershy, was nothing the pegasus wasn’t used to. However, four Royal Guards *and* Princess Celestia as well was another thing entirely for her. She had nothing but the utmost respect and admiration for Celestia, but still...

“If you feel uncomfortable with so many ponies here, we can just as easily wait outside.” Luna offered gently.

“Oh no, I couldn’t possibly have you wait outside for me. That would be rude as a hostess. Please, make yourselves at home. I’ll go get a few extra pillows from my closet for the others.”



The three mares walked quietly into the pegasus's cottage, admiring the welcoming atmosphere it held. Luna sat on a soft bean bag while Rarity and Twilight made themselves comfortable on a couch. Five minutes later Fluttershy reemerged from the kitchen before making her way towards a closet. She pulled out a hooffull of pillows and blankets and set them in the center of the room. No sooner had she done so when a knock could be heard at the door.

"I think that's Celly right now." Luna got up from her spot while waving off the yellow pegasus, who nervously looked to the cottage door. "Don't worry, Fluttershy, I'll get it."

Twilight leaned towards Rarity and whispered softly. "She just called Princess Celestia 'Celly', didn't she?"

Rarity let out a lighthearted chuckle. "Oh, Twilight, come now. They're sisters; nicknames are only natural for them."

Luna opened the door to reveal none other than the ponies she had mentioned. Princess Celestia stood behind Applejack, Pinkie Pie, and Rainbow Dash, while four pegasi guards flanked them on either side. "Hello, sister. I thought I felt your magic near here." Celestia looked into the home. "I trust you found the others alright?"

Luna gave a nod. "Yes, and it was like I said it would be. It was the six of them."

"So I see..." Celestia turned to her guards. "Lily Wing, please have your team keep a perimeter around this cottage. Mind where you walk, since there are plenty of small animals around here."

The guards gave a bow to both Celestia and Luna before beginning their patrol of the area, then Celestia and the other three mares made their way inside and took seats in the living room.

"I...I hope you don't mind the tight space, Princess Celestia. I...well, I would have made preparations if I had known you'd be here with Princess Luna today, but...um..."

"It's quite alright, Fluttershy." Celestia said reassuringly while giving Fluttershy a gentle smile. The pegasus seemed to visibly relax upon hearing those words. Satisfied with helping the Spirit of Kindness calm

down, Celestia returned her attention to the group as a whole. "Now, seeing as all the ponies we need are here, I believe Luna and I can talk to you about *why* exactly we are here. Pinkie Pie, I know we already told you, but there's a bit more to it than that."

Pinkie Pie, who had been uncharacteristically quiet since arriving, gave a small smile and nod. "Okey-dokey! I'm all ears!!"

Luna cleared her throat before speaking. "As my sister and I explained, you six have been chosen to take on a most important duty in regards to Equestria."

"What duty would that be? Your personal bodyguards?" Rainbow asked excitedly, earning a chuckle from Celestia.

"No, something much more demanding. Care to explain, Luna?"

The Princess of the Night nodded in agreement. "Celestia and I were directed here by the Elements of Harmony to find our successors..."

While normally a quiet place, the silence that hung in the air of Fluttershy's cottage was enough for one to hear the gentle snoring of the bunnies upstairs.

"S-s-succesors?" Twilight repeated. "W-what do you mean, Princess?"

"Just as it sounds like, Twilight." Luna answered. "You, Rarity, Fluttershy, Applejack, Rainbow Dash, and Pinkie Pie have all been chosen by the Elements of Harmony to carry on as the future rulers of Equestria."

"Wait, hold on there just a sec'." Applejack cut in. "Ah don't know if I'm hearing this right. Yer sayin' I've been chosen to be a future *princess* of Equestria?"

"Precisely." Celestia replied.

Applejack jumped to her feet. "But...I ain't a princess! Hay, I'm not even one of them nobles in Canterlot. I don' wear all those frou-frou gowns and shiny slippers, either. I don' speak all sophisticated-like and I sure as hay don' know how to run a kingdom." She adjusted her hat before sitting back down, a deep frown marring her features. "I certainly can' just up and

leave my family to run the farm by themselves, either...Sweet Apple Acres *depends* on me!" She sighed. "I really wasn't expectin' anything like this..."

"Nor were the rest of your friends, Applejack. There will be time to figure things out though, I promise." Celestia answered with an understanding smile.

Twilight's eyes were watering a bit at this point. They were going to be Princess Celestia and Princess Luna's *successors*? "B-but Princess Celestia...does that mean you're...leaving us?" The thought of Princess Celestia leaving Equestria was enough to crush her spirits. "I...I don't know if I could-"

Celestia's eyes widened before the gravity of Twilight's question hit her. She placed a comforting wing over Twilight. "Goodness, no! Oh, I'm sorry Twilight, I must have had you worried." She nuzzled her student gently before continuing. "No, Luna and I will simply be...stepping down."

Luna smiled. "Yes, that would be an appropriate way of putting it. Celestia and I have ruled Equestria since before it was even founded. We'll continue to remain here with the six of you, and while we won't play as active of a role in governing the kingdom, we'll be here to help you. It's sort of like a long overdue vacation for the two of us."

"What about my little sister, Sweetie Belle, or my boutique? Like Applejack, I *do* have to things here that I have to take care of. Not to say this isn't a wonderful bit of news to hear, but..." Rarity frowned before looking down. "What made the Elements choose us? Is it because we're the Spirits of Harmony as well?"

Celestia shook her head. "I'm not fully certain on that, Rarity, but I'm sure that has some significance in their decision."

Rarity slowly looked up, her eyes full of distress. "Would I be correct in saying this is more of a civil duty than an option?"

Luna offered her a sympathetic smile. "It would make things very difficult for the land if you six refused to take up the mantle. You see, the natural order of the planet is...changing...and it needs you six in order to help push those changes into affect. If you don't, well, I think it would be safe to say that Equestria would be going through hard times for ages to come without the guidance all of you would provide for fit."

“So, let me get this straight...” Rainbow cut in. “We’re going to become rulers of Equestria because the Elements of Harmony say so?” She frowned. “How come we weren’t told about this from the Elements themselves, huh? How come you and Princess Celestia were told about this, and not us?? We *are* the Spirits of Harmony, aren’t we?”

Twilight cast a worried look to Princess Celestia and Princess Luna before placing a hoof on the cyan pegasus’s shoulder. “Rainbow...”

“It’s fine, Twilight.” Celestia raised a hoof to calm the unicorn. “That’s a good question, Rainbow Dash. The truth is while Luna and I are the rulers of Equestria, we are not what some think us to be. We are not deities, or omnipotent. Yes, I can use scrying magic, and Luna’s able to enter ponies’ dreams, but these powers have limits. So, to answer your question honestly, Luna and I are not entirely sure why things developed this way.” She tapped a hoof to her chin thoughtfully before continuing. “Even after several thousand years of ruling this land have passed, neither of us fully understands how we ended up in the current positions we did. We sort of just...*were*.”

Luna decided to continue where Celestia had left off. “The Elements of Harmony have been a part of this world for as long as Celestia and I can remember, which as we’ve stated before, is quite a while. They’ve subtly helped guide us and understand our powers, but the majority of our work was through our own experience. Let me say this much, Equestria was not nearly as organized of a kingdom as it is today. A lot of our initial creation of the government was touch and go for us. We also had to worry about dragons, and griffons, and the Diamond Dogs...”

“Hmmp. I imagine *those* mongrels were a charming bunch to deal with.” Rarity grumbled while her eyes darkened a little.

“You don’t know the half of it.” Luna chuckled a bit before continuing. “The point being is this; you’ll slowly come to understand what your respective powers are capable of, outside of what you already have. Celestia and I, even as we speak, are beginning to see the briefest of visions of what you six will do in terms of guiding Equestria’s future, but we’re not certain.”

Fluttershy looked up, her eyes shimmering with moisture while her lips quivered slightly. “So...does this mean we have to leave everything we

have behind? I...I don't think I could possibly leave my animal friends behind, especially when they need me so much."

"Yeah, and I have to help the weather ponies in Ponyville. I am the most experienced member of the town's team, and none of the others have enough years under their belt to take things into their own hooves without me around." Rainbow added.

"What about my home...I mean, the library, Princess? Would I have to leave that unattended? Is Spike able to come back to Canterlot with me?" Twilight's voice began to take on a more panicked tone. "I...I don't mean to sound ungrateful, but...I've come to love Ponyville very much."

"...and I'd be terrified of the mess Sweetie Belle might make of the place in my absence. Goodness, I'm feeling faint just thinking about it! Besides, she's much too young to be left alone! Oh, Sweetie Belle would be so alone at night and..."

"...not to mention Applebuckin' season is only a few months away, and Big Mac can't do it all on his own. Applebloom is gettin' older, but she has 'bout another year or so before she's old 'nough to be buckin' those trees like Macintosh and I do..."

"...I still haven't finished organizing all the shelves in the non-fiction section, either..."

"...I have fabrics that are supposedly on their way from Manehattan, and if I'm not around to take them..."

"...if I can't get enough blankets made for the little animals, they could freeze when winter comes around this..."

It was Pinkie Pie, however, who remained quiet the whole time. She looked up to Princess Celestia, who in turn simply nodded. Pinkie Pie smiled before getting back to her feet and taking in a huge breath. "HEY!"

The five mares all stopped talking and turned towards the pink party pony.

"Girls, I know that we're all super-duper busy most of the time, but..." Pinkie continued to demonstrate a rare sense of control as she spoke in a calm and collected tone. "...this is something bigger than us. I mean

*BIGGER* bigger than us! It's Equestria, and the rest of the world! I mean, yeah, the Cakes will have trouble running Sugarcube Corner without me, and Gummy's going to need someone to look after him, but...the truth is, this is something that could be important for many, many, many, *many* years. Like Princess Luna said, if we say no to this, the world could end up becoming a bit coo-coo as a result!" She grinned brightly to her friends. "Besides, it could be lots of fun, too!"

Her friends all looked at her with uncertain expressions, though they all gave murmurs and nods of agreement. Rainbow eventually broke the silence among them. "How long do we have until we have to go to Canterlot?"

Celestia looked out a window to the midday skies of Equestria. Her magenta eyes seemed to be looking past the skies though, focusing on nothing in particular. Several moments dragged by before she seemed to come back to reality, a smile on her face. "Roughly a week. Six days and some odd hours before the hour of your calling happens."

"Huh...one week? That's...surprisingly not much time for me to talk to Big Mac an' the family. We'll need to hire some extra help and that'll be difficult as it is. Caramel is a hard worker, but he's only one hired-hoof. We'd need...hay, at least three more ponies to cover for me, an' that ain't includin' Spring and Summer when Mac and I are tendin' to the tree saplings."

"I understand your concern, Applejack." Celestia spoke while fixing her gentle gaze on the orange earth pony directly. The cowpony's eyes dropped to the floor, unable to meet the warm gaze of the ancient pony princess. "I promise you that Luna and I will help ensure that your family, as well as the rest of your families, are not left without help. Canterlot will be more than willing to give any of your family members a home as well, if need be. The castle has more than enough rooms to fit almost every single pony in this town alone."

"Oh wow..." Fluttershy whispered. "But...I don't think that the animals would like the big crowded city of Canterlot when they have the nice, quiet woods outside of Ponyville."

Luna suddenly straightened up, her eyes gaining a similar distant look to them that Celestia had. "I...don't think that will be a major problem for you, Fluttershy."

Fluttershy shrunk back a bit upon hearing the princess's words. "I...but the animals here truly depend-"

"No, Luna's right, Fluttershy. Trust us, for you in particular, it won't be a problem."

The yellow pegasus seemed like she wanted to argue, but gave a nod, trusting the alicorns' words. "O...okay..."

Celestia and Luna both stood up, looking at each other and back at the six mares. They seemed to be sharing a private conversation with each other based on the looks they exchanged.

"Well," Luna cleared her throat. "I suppose Celestia and I will have to find a place to stay for the evening...there are inns in Ponyville, right?"

Silence once again permeated through the room.

Rarity was the first to give an answer, coughing while giving the two a sheepish smile. "Well, technically there aren't. You see, your Highness, Ponyville is still a rather small town. Most visitors here have family, so they just stay with them. The town hall sometimes offers a room, but those rooms are usually just unused office space. We...don't usually expect visitors of such importance."

"Actually..." Applejack began. "If...if neither of you or yer guards mind, the Apple family would be more than willing to give ya'll a nice place to sleep. Now, mind you, it won't be fancy, but we've got plenty of warm blankets and beds, and we have a nice cozy guest room for you two as well..." She blushed a bit. "...that's if ya'll don' mind the lack of luxury that yer both usually entitled to..."

The elder alicorn sister arched an eyebrow before smiling genuinely at the earth pony's generous offer. "That's very kind of you, Applejack, but are you certain we wouldn't be imposing at all?"

"Not at all, Princess Celestia." Applejack answered with a smile. "Shoot, I bet neither of you have had an Apple family meal yet, have you?"

“No...I don’t recall ever eating at your family’s farm.” Celestia couldn’t help but chuckle with mild amusement as the young mare swelled with pride.

“Well that just won’ do! You two haven’t lived until you’ve had a good home-cooked meal at the Apple house.” She turned to the others and continued. “Ya’ll are more than welcome to join us too, by the way.”

“Heheh, I can’t remember the last time your family cooked for me, Applejack.” Rainbow grinned. “I must have just moved into Ponyville the last time I ate over at your place.”

Twilight felt her mouth watering. She still remembered the extravagant meal she had when she first came to Ponyville. The Apple family changed her entire outlook on what ‘brunch’ was and just how much a pony could physically eat in one sitting. She leaned close to Celestia and whispered. “Applejack’s grandmother makes the best apple pie in the world. I’m not kidding.”

Celestia noted the seriousness in her student’s words. It was settled, then. “Well, Luna, shall we inform Captain Lily Wing and her team that they should save their bits and plan to have dinner at Sweet Apple Acres?”

Luna could only nod and smile, her own appetite finally catching up with her.

After one of the best meals Celestia had eaten in years (quite a claim coming from an ageless alicorn), the two princesses and their guards were shown to their respective rooms. Celestia and Luna’s room consisted of a large bed with a wooden frame, a small nightstand with a lantern on it, and a window looking over the silent acres of the Apple family orchard.

“Ah hope you don’ mind the lack of space, yer Highness.” Applejack began as she opened up the door to one of the guest rooms. “While the Apple family house is large ‘nough to fit a whole herd of ponies, our accommodations aren’t exactly up to par with royalty.”

“That’s quite fine, Applejack.” Celestia reassured the earth pony as she placed a hoof on the surprisingly soft mattress. “As soon as Luna comes upstairs after raising the moon we can settle how we’ll sleep tonight.”



“Alright, make yerself at home...” the orange mare hovered at the door for a moment, worried expression concerning the Princess of the Sun. Applejack spoke once more, albeit much softer than before. “...I talked with my family ‘bout the news involvin’ me an’ the girls being...princesses and what have you...they took it in stride, surprisingly.”

Celestia released a small breath she had been holding. *“Good, so her family is alright with this.”*

Still, it appeared the mare herself was uncertain about the situation. “That’s good to hear, Applejack. You have a very loving family from what I can tell. Like I said earlier, Luna and I will do all that we can to help support your families with your absence. I know for a fact that there are numerous ponies who would be willing to work on an orchard, especially one as well known as yours.”

“Heh, you flatter me, Princess.” Applejack adjusted her hat to hide her embarrassment. “I hope yer right though ‘bout gettin’ help ‘round here. Big Mac is strong, but he’s only one pony. Granny Smith is well over the hill, and while her mind is still as sharp as a whip *most* of the time, she’s not as strong as she used to be.”

A featherlight touch graced the earth pony’s shoulder, and she looked to see Princess Celestia placing one of her wings gently over the smaller pony. “It makes me happy to see you care so deeply for your family, Applejack. You’re a model example of what can result from hard work and kindness.”

“Ah...well...” Applejack began to blush deep red. “Heheh, shoot, now you’re going and makin’ me all flustered.” She removed her hat and scratched her mane while smiling. “Thank you kindly, Princess Celestia.”

“No thanks is needed. It’s only the truth.” Celestia replied, pride evident in her voice. “You’re truly a wonderful pony, and your family is without a doubt proud of you.”

Applejack was now sniffing a bit. “Aw shucks, I ain’t nothin’ but a regular pony like the rest of us Ponyville folk, heheh.”

Celestia lowered her head to Applejack’s level. “Nonsense. You, as well as every other pony, are special. I *know* you’ll be a great leader for Equestria.”

The orange earth pony mare felt a single foreleg wrap around her frame gently. She felt a warm sensation envelope her, and her worries seemed to become a little less heavy on her. Raising her gaze to Celestia's, she was met by two gentle magenta eyes. "I appreciate this, Princess Celestia. For listenin' to me and stuff. Thanks again."

"Anytime, Applejack. That's what I'm here for."

The Princess of the Sun was soon lying in the rather comfortable, if not worn and aged, bed that the Apples had provided for her and Luna. The younger sister, being the Princess of the Night, was wide awake and content with simply watching the starry sky from her window.

Luna was currently sitting on the mattress, facing towards the window with rapt attention. "Wow...you can see everything so clearly out here. Canterlot has its observatory, but even still, there's always some activity going on at night, so the lights can be a bit of a problem when stargazing."

Celestia, who was slowly drifting off to sleep, opened one eye while giving Luna an adoring smile. "Is the Summer Triangle visible tonight?"

Luna directed her gaze towards a particular section of the sky. "Yep, there's Deneb, Altair, and Vega." The younger alicorn was silent for several moments before she sighed. "Oh dear, I think I made Polaris too bright tonight."

Celestia chuckled quietly while Luna's horn glowed a soft hue of blue, a look of concentration etched onto her face.

"That should...oh, but what if somepony's trying to find their way home by using the stars? Perhaps I should keep it like it was, that may be too dim...hm..."

Celestia was soon dozing off to the quiet murmuring of Luna, who was now commenting on the visibility of the Milky Way tonight. Luna would likely be joining her and fall asleep right before dawn, when Celestia would be prodded by the celestial cycle into waking up again. For now, though, the two were content with enjoying a rare moment of rest in the quiet countryside of Ponyville.

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*One week later...*

Twilight paced in a circle in front of the library, pausing every so often and looking towards the mountains that Canterlot was built upon.

"Twilight, Princess Celestia said that Princess Luna would be here before noon, and you know the Princess is good about keeping her word."

The lavender unicorn looked over her shoulder to face her dear friend and assistant, Spike. The baby dragon had a glass of orange juice in one hand and a sandwich in the other.

Shaking her head while trying to calm herself, Twilight stopped for a moment and sat on the grass. "I know, Spike, but I can't help but be nervous. I mean, this is something I never in a million years would have expected to experience." She began pacing again, much to Spike's annoyance. "Me...a princess..."

"Well, *Princess Twilight*, as your assistant, I recommend you get something to eat. You know how you get when you're working on an empty stomach."

Twilight gave the dragon a grateful smile before lifting the sandwich off the plate he was holding with her magic and taking a bite. It was bluegrass and clover with some ranch dressing. Not her favorite, but still delicious.

"Thanks, Spike." She continued to eat the sandwich while downing the orange juice he brought her in one gulp. "Ah...wow, that hit the spot." She let out a content sigh. With her hunger satiated, she returned her attention to waiting, and looked to the town hall clock.

Ten minutes to eleven.

"Twilight! Heeey!!"

The librarian looked up to see the bundle of energy that was Pinkie Pie. She had a harness around her with a small cart which carried some of her personal belongings.

"Morning, Pinkie." Twilight greeted. "Did you eat anything yet? We could make-"

“No problem, Twilight! I had two banana nut muffins and a bowl of oats and daisies this morning! In fact, I have some left over muffins if you want any!” She unstrapped her harness and dug around in a saddle bag she had slung over her back. “Now where is...it...aha!! Found them!”

Before Twilight knew it, a pink hoof shoved a banana nut muffin into her mouth. Twilight immediately tasted the bananas’ natural sweetness on her taste buds, along with the bran and walnuts. It had just the right amount of moistness, and the texture was perfect.

“Oh wow, Pinkie...” Twilight said after swallowing down the delectable morsel. “That was delicious! You’ll have to make more of those when we get to Canterlot.”

“I know, right? I made about a dozen of them, but gave most of them to Mr. and Mrs. Cake.” Her mane drooped a little. “They seemed a little sad to watch me leave, but...I promised them I’d come back to visit! I mailed my parents a letter several days ago telling about the news, but they haven’t sent anything back...” She frowned a bit. “It takes about two days for pegasus mail, and I sent the letter as high priority...I hope they’re alright with this...” She began to scratch the ground nervously. The somewhat gloomy attitude the usually peppy, pink pony permeated was unsettling to her unicorn friend.

Twilight knew very little about Pinkie’s past, and while Pinkie Pie never had anything bad to say about her childhood, she also never had anything positive to say either (at least until she got her cutie mark, that is).

“Well, as long as you let them know, that’s what matters, right? ”

Pinkie looked up before smiling and giving a nod. “Yeah. Hm...by the way, I was wondering...” She dug into her cart and pulled out, much to Twilight’s surprise, Gummy. The toothless alligator clamped down onto Pinkie’s nose while she simply giggled. “Do you think Canterlot has a nice pool for Gummy to live in? He’s alright without water for a couple days, but he does like to have a nice swim once in awhile, don’t you, Gummy?”

The alligator replied by opening his jaws and releasing his grip over Pinkie’s snout. He plopped onto the ground and promptly made his way towards Spike before clamping down on the baby dragon’s tail.

“Gaah! Gummy, let go!” Spike grumbled while attempting to shake the alligator off. “Come on, my tail’s not a chew toy!”

The two mares laughed at the scene before them. Eventually the little alligator released Spike’s tail and instead deciding to turn his attention towards an ant crawling on the ground. Pinkie eventually picked him up by the back of his neck and placed him back into her wagon where he sat quietly.

“Do you know if any of the other girls are ready yet?” Twilight asked. “I have a wagon full of some of my belongings, but that’s about it.” The unicorn gave a nod to a wagon that appeared to be full of mostly books.

“I think Rarity said she had a few more boxes to pack up, mostly Sweetie Belle’s things. She’s been such a busy-body lately that I don’t think she’s slept more than a few hours in the past couple of days. I offered to help her a few times, but she refused, saying she had to have everything packed a certain way!” Pinkie Pie shook her head, giggling a bit. “She can be such a stubborn pony. She’s going to be too worn out for the huge princess party I have planned!”

Another half hour passed between the mares before Rainbow Dash and Applejack neared the library, Applejack carrying a larger cart than Pinkie Pie’s while Rainbow had two saddlebags on her back.

“Is that all your bringing, Rainbow?” Twilight asked. “I mean...it’s not my place to question what you bring, but...”

“Huh?” Rainbow looked to her saddlebags and laughed. “Oh, no, AJ volunteered to carry my stuff with hers in the cart.”

“Wow, Applejack, you’re such a strong pony!” Pinkie Pie beamed as she greeted the Apple family member. “I wonder how strong you really are, though. Maybe we should load up my cart with a few more things and-”

“Now hold yer horses, Pinkie. I only volunteered to help Rainbow here because she went and helped me pack up my own things the other night.” Applejack rolled her neck and stretched her legs as soon as she freed herself of the harness. “It’s quite a load I’m carryin’ right there. Nothin’ short of me or Big Mac would’ve been able to pull it. I don’t think I can do much more than that, though.”

“Oh my...if I had known that everyone was bringing so much I would've brought more than this...”

The four mares looked to see Fluttershy walking towards them. She had two saddlebags on her back like Rainbow Dash, as well as a small wagon filled with several belongings of hers as well.

“Oh, hey, Fluttershy.” Twilight greeted the yellow pegasus. “I wouldn't worry about that. If you really want to get more of your stuff, Princess Luna told us that she'd have a group of movers accompany you back to your house later on and help you out.”

“I guess that would be nice, though I don't want to cause any trouble by doing so...”

“I'm sure it will be fine, Fluttershy.” Twilight said reassuringly.

“Well...I would like to get all my birdseed if I could...and maybe more of my medicine and bandages for any animals at Canterlot...”

Further conversation was cut off by the sound of rolling wheels. The group turned their heads to see a large, wooden cart being pulled by Rarity. She trudged along, grunting as she made her way towards the tree library.

“Ah...good...morning...I...hah...just finished getting everything packed. Sweetie Belle should be...right behind me...”

Sure enough, the sister of Rarity could be seen pulling a small red wagon loaded with some lighter belongings of hers. She gave a yawn as she stopped, unlatching herself from her harness. “Hey, Rarity, can we get something to eat before we leave for Canterlot?”

“Really? I thought you ate the daffodil and tulip salad I gave you this morning. Was that not enough? I can go back home and get-”

“It's alright, Rarity, I can get her something to eat.” Spike volunteered. “Come on, Sweetie Belle, I think we have some hay fries from last night in the fridge, and I could probably make some fried clover if I have enough time.”

Sweetie Belle looked to Rarity, who simply nodded. The young filly trotted after Spike, and the two disappeared into the library.

“Wow, Rarity, you sure you can carry all that to Canterlot? Ah don't mean to question yer strength, but...well, yer not exactly a draft pony, and Canterlot's 'bout eighteen kilotrots from here...”

“No need to worry, Applejack. I may be a fashion designer first and foremost, but I can haul my weight around when the occasion calls for it. I'll just...need to pace myself, that's all.”

“Maybe we can get a few of the Royal Guards to help?” Rainbow suggested.

“Oh, that won't be necessary, Rainbow Dash.”

The cyan pegasus jumped into the air before yelping in surprise. “Wahh!!”

Rainbow Dash, as well as the others, all turned to face the newcomer who had managed to sneak up on them.

“P-Princess Luna!” Twilight managed to stammer out before bowing. The other five mares did likewise. As they rose, they were greeted by a rather odd scene.

“Um...Princess Luna, are you alright?”

The younger alicorn sister looked up quizzically. “Hm? Oh, yes, why?”

Twilight opened and closed her mouth several times before just sighing and speaking her mind. “Well, you're *bowing*...again. It's just not...”

“Normal? Becoming of a Princess?” Luna just chuckled as the lavender pony blushed. “Well, considering you all will be peers to my sister and I, it only seems proper to bow back when you do so to me.”

“Oh...well...we're not princesses yet...” Rarity pointed out. “Though, you do flatter us, your Highness.”

Luna waved a hoof dismissively. “Think nothing of it. You six are more than deserving of my respect, after all. I owe you all a debt I can never fully repay, so showing you all gratitude and kindness is the very least I can do.” She inspected the various carts and luggage the ponies had

brought with them. "Hm...well, this is actually less than I was expecting. Not a problem, though. Do you have everything you need before we depart?"

"A-already?" Twilight raised an eyebrow. "I mean...I was expecting a few movers to accompany us, but...I suppose we can move our belongings without help."

"Oh, no, you won't have to do a thing, Twilight. Celestia and I worked on a transportation spell for large quantities of mass. She's currently working as the anchor for my magic while I see to the transportation of all your belongings to Canterlot."

It was at that point that Spike exited the library, a yellow bottle in hand. "Hey, Twilight, do you know where we keep the mustard-Princess Luna!" He dropped the empty bottle and gave a bow. Sweetie Belle, who was poking her head out of the library, also gave a bow. The six mares noted that the princess did not bow this time, though she approached the baby dragon and filly and gave them the warmest of smiles.

"Spike, isn't it?"

The young dragon's eyes widened. "Y-yes, your Highness."

"I've heard wonderful things about you from my sister, as well as from Twilight Sparkle's letters. It's a pleasure to finally meet such a charming young dragon."

Spike blushed while looking to the ground and smiling. "I-it's nice to meet you, too."

She turned her attention towards the young unicorn. "You must be Sweetie Belle."

The filly seemed embarrassed by the sudden attention, but gave a demure smile and nodded. "Yeah, my sister said she's moving to Canterlot, so I have to come with..." Her smile fell a little, a hoof shuffling the ground as she lowered her gaze. "I...kind of feel nervous though."

Luna gave an understanding nod. "That's perfectly normal, Sweetie Belle. Canterlot's a big city, and it's very different from Ponyville. I'm still getting used to it myself" She crouched down a bit so she was level with the young filly. "If you want, though, I can see to having some of my most



trusted guards provide you with chariot rides to your school everyday. I imagine you have a lot of friends here in Ponyville, don't you?"

Sweetie Belle's eyes lit up. "Y-you'd do that for me?"

Luna placed a gentle hoof on the young unicorn's shoulder as she continued. "Rarity had told me how much you enjoy school. I wouldn't want to tear you away from it, nor would my sister, or yours for that matter."

Sweetie Belle squealed in delight. "Thank you, Princess Luna! I...I was so worried that I'd never get to see Applebloom, Scootaloo, Ms. Cheerilee, or any of my friends ever again!"

Luna laughed as the filly wrapped her front hooves around her. She returned the hug while turning her gaze to Rarity, who gave her a thankful smile. The fashionista mouthed the words 'thank you' as Sweetie Belle released Luna from her grip.

"Well," Luna began after Sweetie Belle had returned to her sister's side. "I believe it's time we get going. If everyone could gather your belongings to this area, I'll transport us there as quickly and safely as I can."

A few minutes of pushing and pulling carts later and the group was prepared. Luna looked to each of the mares and once satisfied that they were prepared, began to channel magic into her horn. A white circle appeared around the perimeter surrounding the group, and light began to emit from it.

"Celestia...we're ready." Luna spoke, her eyes glowing with an ethereal light.

A voice that that seemed to echo all around the group gave reply. *"Alright, Luna. Follow my magic's signature, just like we practiced."*

Luna gave a nod while focusing her magic. Twilight and Rarity were the first to feel the magic flowing through the air. Sweetie Belle soon felt a tingling sensation as well, followed by Spike, and the other mares present. It felt like a summer day had paid visit to Ponyville suddenly, bathing the ponies and baby dragon in a warmth that one could doze off in under the shade of a tree.

Celestia's magic was wonderful in that manner.

"Alright, everyone, try not to move for a few seconds if you would." Luna spoke. A dazzling light erupted from the tip of her horn before it flooded the area. Several seconds passed, and it appeared as if the world was racing by them. Images of trees, rivers, and eventually mountains passed by their vision before the scenery became clearer.

Canterlot. They were standing in the royal court yard of the Canterlot castle, Twilight realized. The others were slowly taking in the scenery before them as well, and had arrived to similar conclusions if their murmuring was any indication.

"Welcome, everypony."

Twilight looked over her shoulder to see Princess Celestia standing a few feet away from where they had appeared, several guards flanking either side of her.

The six mares, filly, and baby dragon all gave respectful bows while Luna approached the elder sister and gave her a bright smile. "So, did I do alright?"

"That was a splendid job, Luna. For a large mass teleportation spell, you did quite well for a first real attempt." Celestia answered with pride. "Seeing as you invented it, though, I'm not too surprised." The alicorn turned her attention towards her student and the other ponies. "I imagine that you're all rather tired. I know that you all were rather busy these past several days, judging by all the luggage you brought with you."

Twilight spoke first. "Well, we're a bit rundown, but I think we're doing well, all things considered."

Celestia's smile grew a little. "I'm glad to hear that. Like we mentioned earlier this week, if you need to make any future trips to Ponyville, please don't hesitate to ask one of us. We'd be glad to help in any way we can..." She looked over each of the mares, Spike, and her gaze lingered a little longer on Sweetie Belle. The young unicorn gave a shy smile, hiding behind Rarity's legs. Celestia laughed quietly before sitting down on the ground so she was at eye level with the filly. "Hello, Sweetie Belle."

The filly gasped. “Y-you know my name, too?”

“But of course. Twilight has told me all about you, Applebloom, and Scootaloo. How could I forget about the Cutie Mark Crusaders?”

All traces of shyness vanished from the filly’s face at that point. “You know about us?! Hey, do you think you can tell us what our cutie marks are? You and Princess Luna are princesses, so you should both be able to figure them out, right?”

“Sweetie Belle...” Rarity spoke, but Celestia waved her hoof gently, dismissing Rarity’s concern.

“I’m afraid such things are beyond my sister and I.” She offered a sympathetic smile to the young filly, understanding how exciting it was to discover one’s Cutie Mark all too well. “We’re not able to determine the special talents of a pony. That’s something that you must discover on your own.”

“Awww...” Sweetie Belle deflated a little, but looked up hopefully, “Maybe...maybe Applebloom and Scootaloo can come here once in awhile?”

“I would love that. It’s always nice to have young faces in this old castle.” the alicorn answered. Having the three adventurous fillies romping around the halls would no doubt bring some life into the at times dull stone walls of the castle.

Celestia rose back to her feet and continued, once again addressing the group. “Well, I hate to rush all of you after just arriving, but we have an important task to take care of involving you six in particular. The Elements, as I’m sure you already know, have chosen you six to become the future rulers of Equestria. As is the case, your presence is needed in the throne room.”

The six mares stood in the center of the throne room while Celestia and Luna were currently seated in their respective seats overlooking the ponies. A little ways off stood Spike and Sweetie Belle, along with a group of Royal Guards, as well as about a dozen castle attendants and several government officials. All the attention was a bit much for them, especially Fluttershy and Twilight.

Celestia and Luna were currently discussing something with each other in hushed voices, glancing towards the six mares every so often. They seemed to be concerned about the time too, as they looked to the large clock hanging from the throne room entrance about every minute.

“We have to wait until the clock chimes the hour, Celly.”

The elder alicorn simply rolled her eyes while her sister pouted. “That’s just for show, Luna, you know that. I’d rather get this started as soon as possible so we can get them settled in. You know how hard it will be for them to adjust to the changes.”

Luna’s shoulders slumped in defeat before giving a nod and turning to the six, deciding to speak first. “It seems that the time to begin the coronation ceremony has approached.” She cleared her throat before looking to the other ponies (and dragon) in the room. “All of you who are gathered, I ask that you be witnesses to this event for those in Equestria who are unable to see it firsthand.”

The six mares were unsure of what to expect. Twilight had asked the princesses what they were to do, but Celestia simply answered that they were to remain attentive and that was it. While used to the sometimes vague and intentionally cryptic instructions of her teacher, the unicorn couldn’t help but feel a bit on edge. What exactly was going to happen that required so many witnesses to see?

Celestia continued where Luna left off. “Twilight Sparkle. Applejack. Rainbow Dash. Fluttershy. Rarity. Pinkie Pie. The six of you, who represent the Spirits of the Elements of Harmony, have been chosen by said magical artifacts to rule Equestria. Do all of you accept this?”

The six all gave a simple ‘yes’ in unison.

“Do you swear upon the Elements to bear this task and follow the principles of Harmony, to hold true to them, and guide Equestria to the best of your abilities?” Luna asked.

“Yes.”

“And do you swear to open up your hearts to not just the ponies of Equestria, but the other inhabitants of the world, big and small, and value all forms of life, even those that are *not* benign?” Celestia inquired.

“Yes.”

“Finally, do you all swear that you will uphold your respective duties, and should the time call for it, protect Equestria from danger?”

“Yes.”

Celestia and Luna both smiled before channeling magic into their horns. They closed their eyes and began to chant in an archaic tongue that Twilight vaguely recognized as Ancient Equinic, though most simply knew it as ‘the language of the Royal Pony Sisters’.

A circle of rainbow-colored light formed around the six mares. They felt warmth surging into their bodies as magic built up in the area around them. More magic than any of them had ever felt before. More magic than what could have been possible for even five hundred unicorns to generate.

The two sisters finished chanting, and were now channeling their seemingly limitless power into the circle. The six mares now had their eyes closed, having become overwhelmed the awesome magical power flowing into them. Six orbs of different colors suddenly emerged from the ponies before floating up into the air.

They were the Elements of Harmony, shining in all their magical glory for the world to see.

“The rest is up to the Elements now...” Celestia stated as the two cut off their magic flow to the circular field of light.

The magical artifacts began to spin slowly above the circle of rainbow-hued light. After a minute had passed, the Elements began to rapidly speed up their spinning, eventually reaching speeds Rainbow Dash would have been proud of. A wave of magic shot out from them, knocking several ponies off their feet. The Elements suddenly halted, humming loudly as they floated back down to their respective owners. The castle began to shake a little once the Elements of Harmony vanished, and the ponies gathered in the throne room became nervous, several shouting and crying out in fear of being crushed by the castle walls.

“Don’t worry!” Luna called out. “The castle will be fine. This is merely the final part of the coronation.”

The ponies calmed down a little, though they continued to cast glances towards roof above their heads every so often.

Finally the rumbling ceased, and the light eventually died down. All who were in the throne room fixed their gazes on the six mares lying before them. Gasps could be heard in the crowd as they lay their eyes on the Spirits of Harmony.

The first to open her eyes was Rarity. She groaned while slowly shaking her head. "Oh my, that was quite a spell..." She stood on wobbly feet, before she lost her balance and fell back onto her haunches. "Ooof!"

Next was Applejack and Rainbow Dash, who both let out similar groans. Applejack seemed to be even worse than Rarity, though, for she was unable to do so much as rise to her feet. Rainbow Dash took several seconds before getting her bearings, and stood fine, although she appeared to be a bit dizzy.

Pinkie Pie, Twilight, and Fluttershy were the last to wake up. Fluttershy, like Rarity, had ungracefully fallen back, while Pinkie Pie got to her feet a bit too quickly before tipping from side to side and falling over.

"Whooah!!" the pink earth pony shook her head several times before deciding to remain seated.

Twilight was the only other pony aside from Rainbow who had been able to stand on her own four legs, if only barely. She gazed down at her hooves, then realized something was off.

"Princess Celestia...what happened?" Twilight asked.

Celestia and Luna were positively beaming. The elder sister instead turned to a group of guards present. "Please bring the large mirror over here that I requested earlier."

Several guards managed to shake themselves out of the apparent stupor they were in before giving quick nods and wheeling over a large mirror that could have covered an entire wall at the Ponyville schoolhouse.

What followed after were a series of gasps and a bewildered looks from the mares.

"Wh-what in the hay is on my head?! Is...is that a horn?!"

“My word, are these real? Oh, they’re simply lovely!”

“Wooo, I’m super-tall now, hahaha!”

“Um...this isn’t one of those fun house mirrors...is it?”

“Hey, look at my wings! They’re *huge*, haha!!”

Twilight’s jaw went slack as she took in her appearance. The lavender pony staring back at her was probably around the same height as Celestia! Her horn was about twice as long now, and her body had a more lithe build to it.

The biggest change, though, were the two large, feathered wings that flared out a little as she unconsciously stretched muscles she never remembered having before.

“I...I...I’m...” Twilight took a step closer to her reflection, rubbing her eyes with a hoof. “I’m...dreaming?”

Celestia chuckled. “No, Twilight Sparkle, I assure you that you are not dreaming.”

Twilight looked up to her mentor for several moments before looking back at her reflection.

“Oh...”

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Three hours and numerous sessions of calming down the six mares later, Celestia and Luna were sitting in their expansive bedroom with the six new alicorn mares, Spike, and Sweetie Belle. For the ancient pony sisters, they were quite a sight to take in.

Twilight Sparkle found that she still needed to look up at Celestia, if only a little. Aside from the longer horn and wings, she was easily recognized.

Pinkie Pie was shorter still, probably a few inches shorter than the lavender alicorn. Her frizzy mane had grown out in length, and was now running down her back like a waterfall of pink cotton candy. Her horn was

as long as Twilight's, too. The wings on her back seemed to have a mind of their own, stretching and flapping every so often, causing her to giggle.

Rainbow Dash had grown very little compared to the others. Her horn was only slightly longer than that of an average unicorn's, and she stood only a hoof length taller than she used too. Her mane had grown a little longer, though, which she seemed to be bothering her a little. Her wings, however, had gone through major changes. Once powerful yet small enough to tuck to her sides, they were now large and draped over her back, covering up her flanks as they rested.

Rarity was a similar case to Rainbow, being only a bit taller. She stood around the same height as Luna, and her horn was a bit longer, too. Her mane still had the same elegant curl to it, but was now running along her backside as she sat down. The wings sprouting out from her shoulder blades were about the same size as those of the Princess of the Moon's. One of the most noticeable changes, however, was her lustrous white coat. While it wasn't overwhelmingly bright, a faint sheen of light seemed to play off of it at all times, much like the way Celestia's own mane shined at all times.

Fluttershy stood about three feet taller now, just a little over Luna's height. Her typically long mane now pooled around her like the branches of a weeping willow. Her horn was the same size as Rarity's, and her wings had gained a more softer, elegant appearance to them.

Applejack had gone through the biggest changes when compared to the other five. She now stood about a hoof taller than Celestia, and on her forehead rested a horn that was easily a few inches longer than the Princess of the Sun's. Large, powerful wings rested at her sides as she sat on the ground. She stretched them every once in awhile, glancing at them with uncertainty while tapping her horn with a hoof as though to confirm it to be real. Her mane and tail had kept their same style of being tied in a ponytail knot, but had grown out in proportion with the rest of her body. As for her body itself, she had gained a more athletic build, her muscles stretching and growing out to accommodate her new frame. Every movement of hers was accompanied by rippling muscles that looked powerful enough to move at least three field plows with little difficulty.

"So...uh..." Rainbow Dash began. "What...happened to us, aside from the obvious?"



“Aside from Rarity and Twilight, none of you six have used magic before, correct?” Luna asked.

“Well, pegasi can float on clouds...and earth ponies tend to have a sixth sense with the environment.” Rainbow Dash answered. “Though, yeah, only Twilight and Rarity can cast spells.”

Luna smiled. “Right. Alicorns are...different. We have a bit of unicorn, pegasi, and earth pony running through our blood.

“You will all eventually get used to the changes you’ve gone through...yes, Applejack, even you will learn how to use magic, trust me. As for your magic powers, that depends on you individually. For instance, I have power over the moon’s orbit, as well as the display of the night sky, and to a certain extent, music. Celestia has ties to the sun, as well as the ‘classical’ studies as ponies describe them in this day and age.”

“Classical studies? Wait one second, how is somethin’ like philosophy magic?”

“That’s a good question, Applejack, and in a nutshell, it isn’t.”

The former farm pony gave the Princess of the Sun a flat, unamused look. She suppressed the desire to groan and instead spoke calmly. “...okay, can ya explain for me then how yer *magically* connected to something that ain’t magical?”

“Let’s see...I guess the easiest way to put it is like this; I will have random moments of inspiration where I begin writing long essays on the importance of life, or art, and other such things. A week later somepony will have a theory on life’s big meaning published, or what the purpose of love is. Things like that. I create a spark if you would. My inspiration creates inspiration in ponies across the land, though I cannot directly control it.”

“Oh! You mean like a butterfly effect? Whooa, that’s craaaazy!” Pinkie chimed in.

Celestia laughed. “Yes, I suppose that would be a suitable term for it.”

“Alright, that’s all fine and dandy, but what ‘bout us then? How do we know what we’re in charge of as far as our magic goes?” Applejack continued.

Again, Luna spoke. "Well, Applejack, Celestia and I sort of have an idea of what you six will be doing already. A vision from the Elements would be one way to put it." She looked towards Rarity, Twilight, and Fluttershy. "Rarity, from what I can tell, your powers encompass Generosity, first of all. They also follow the fine arts like theatre and sculpture, as well as beauty and aesthetics in the world."

Rarity's eyes widened. "I...I'm in control of those things?"

"Like Celestia explained, not so much in control of as much as what your powers are related to. Your powers are not so concrete as they are abstract, though beauty can be from such things like gems, rainbows, waterfalls...the possibilities are unlimited."

Rarity was silent after that, her eyes still shining with silent wonder.

"Well...um, if you wouldn't mind telling me, that is, Princess Luna...what are my special powers related to?"

Luna was clearly eager to share the news if her grin was any indication. "Fluttershy, I think your powers are very well suited towards you as well. You are connected to Kindness, as well as the flora and fauna of the world."

Fluttershy's eyes became as big as dinner plates as she gave a quiet gasp. "A-all the animals and plants..of...the world?"

"Correct. From every ladybug, grasshopper, or sparrow, all the way to manticores, ponies, and dragons. From every dandelion, clover, and tree sapling to every vine, pine tree, and oak. I'm not certain on how deep this connection runs, but...I can tell you right now that it's powerful.

"I...I see...um...oh my...that is quite a large amount of things to take on." Fluttershy mumbled to herself. "I...I'm not upset at all, though. I like it, actually." She gave Luna a cheery smile.

The lavender alicorn that Luna turned to gave her an anxious smile. "So, you know my powers too, huh?"

Luna nodded. "Twilight Sparkle, your powers are very peculiar, and they're going to directly affect my sister's as well as mine to an extent. Your powers encompass Magic, science, and a third aspect."

“What’s the third aspect?” the lavender alicorn asked.

“The Elements have deemed that the system of the solar cycle needs to be changed. You’ll be in charge of the orbit of the planet around the Sun.”

“Around...the...” Twilight quirked an eyebrow. “I thought the Sun orbited the world, though?”

“Yes, it still does...for now.” Celestia spoke. “However, my powers are beginning to change. I’m finding it a little harder to move the Sun these days, and the planet seems to be going through some changes as well. You’ll be in charge of affecting this new path the planet shall take in its revolution around the Sun, as well as the angle and speed it shall rotate, which will in turn bring forth day and night.”

“I...wait, you mean I’m taking away the jobs of you *and* Princess Luna?” Twilight asked. “Oh, nonono, I can’t-”

“Twilight, my faithful stud...excuse me...my dear friend and *peer*...you aren’t *taking* our jobs. Luna will still be in charge of the moon’s orbit as well as affecting the brightness of the stars and other such aspects of the night sky. I will have a little less work, though. I’ll now only be in charge of determining the warmth and brightness of the Sun, and insure that enough sunlight reaches the planet every day. That will be my duty, along with inspiring the classics, as Luna explained.”

Twilight gave a nod, still a bit uncertain about this change. “Okay.”

“Now, as for you three...” Celestia continued, turning towards Pinkie Pie, Rainbow Dash, and Applejack. “...Applejack, you’re powers are tied, of course, to Honesty. You also have close ties to the physical earth and soil, which affects not only crop growth, but also the foundations of towns and the shape of the planet’s surface. Such powers can make mountains and volcanoes, and cause earthquakes.”

Applejack felt her jaw go slack. “Ah’m in charge of makin’ volcanoes an’ earthquakes???”

“Among other things, yes.” Celestia chuckled.

Applejack blinked several times before taking her hat (which still fit on her head, thankfully) off. "Hoo boy...Ah'm gonna need a nap after all this is done."

"What about me?" Rainbow inquired eagerly.

"You, Rainbow Dash, have a task very fitting for an alicorn such as yourself. Your powers are aligned with the weather and seasons, as well as the wind, seas, rivers, and water of the world. You're also the Princess of Loyalty, though I'm sure you already figured that much out."

Rainbow beamed while punching her front hooves into the air. "Awesome! I can move the oceans, haha!!"

Pinkie Pie was practically bouncing in place as Celestia cast a warm smile towards her. "How about me, Princess? I bet I'm the Princess of Partying, right?!"

Celestia shook her head, causing Pinkie Pie to halt in place. "No, you're not. You're something much greater than that, Pinkie Pie."

"Really?!" Pinkie gushed. "What, what is it?? Huh, huh, huh??"

"You're powers are connected with Laughter, as well as emotions, celebrations, and lastly, hope."

"Hope?" Pinkie inquired, halting in mid-bounce. "Whattya mean by that?"

"What she means, Pinkie..." Luna began. "...is that you're powers are tied to what give ponies the abilities to do amazing things, like building cities like Manehattan; give ponies strength and will to do things they normally couldn't do. You're magic is very special, just like the others but, like Rarity, you're powers are more abstract than physical."

"Wow..." Pinkie whispered. "That sounds really...important."

"It is." Celestia agreed. "All of you have important tasks to take on. Luna and I will do all we can to help you as you learn to use your magic, wings, and new connection to the land."

The six mares all gave nods of understanding.

Rarity looked down to her sister, who had curled up at her feet. "Well, Sweetie Belle...how do I look? Am I regal enough to be the Princess of Beauty?"

Sweetie Belle had a look of awe on her face. "You look really pretty, Rarity!" Sweetie Belle replied, earning a nuzzle from her older sister. "Does *you* being a princess make *me* one, too?"

Rarity chuckled a bit. "I suppose that in a way it does, doesn't it?"

"Wow, I'm a princess! Hahaha!"

Meanwhile, Twilight had sat down so she could talk to Spike at eye-level, just like Celestia always did. "So, Spike, are you willing to be the number-one assistant for a princess now?" She smirked a little as her reptilian friend looked up suddenly, eyes widening.

The baby dragon gave Twilight a hopeful grin. "You mean it? I can still help you out with things?"

"Of course you can! After all, who's going to help me organize all those books in the Canterlot library? I'm sure Owlowicious would be willing to move here, but he's only one owl."

Spike jumped towards his dear friend and wrapped his tiny arms around her neck. Twilight all too happily accepted the hug, glad to see Spike in good spirits despite all the big changes they had gone through in the past couple of hours.

The two sisters smiled at the sight. Luna eventually cleared her throat to get their attention. "You will all have the rest of the day to enjoy to yourselves. I have several of our more experienced guards stationed near here, and if any of you need a tour of the castle, feel free to ask them. Although...Twilight, I believe you're pretty familiar with the place, are you not?"

The lavender alicorn nodded once. "I know most of the palace pretty well, though I also know there are rooms that I wasn't allowed into for various reasons."

Luna gave a satisfied nod to the lavender alicorn. "Good. If anything, perhaps you could give the others a brief tour of the castle?"

“I’d love to.”

“Wonderful.” Celestia smiled. “Tomorrow during midday you six will introduce yourselves to the Canterlot ponies at the central plaza. No formal speeches need to be prepared, sharing a word or two with the ponies would be a wise idea.”

The six mares, unicorn filly, and dragon all exited the room, leaving Celestia and Luna alone. The Princess of the Sun gave a content sigh as she watched the door close behind her. “I’m glad they’re taking all of this well. I was worried they would be unwilling to do this.”

“Well, they haven’t really had to do any governing yet. Give them time, Celly.”

Celestia frowned a little, but it was more of a look of acceptance than worry on her face. “I suppose you’re right, Luna. I won’t lie, though, I’m particularly worried for Twilight Sparkle, Rainbow Dash, and Fluttershy. They’re going to be taking on jobs normally done by *many* ponies at one time, or in the case of Twilight, a task that has never been done before.”

“I’m sure they’ll do fine, Celly.” Luna said reassuringly. “Come on, we’d better make sure that dinner is being prepared.”

“Ah, right, right. We had better make sure those apple pies are coming along well, too. I’ve heard that Applejack’s very critical about meals involving anything with apples.”

“I can’t imagine why.” Luna joked, earning a laugh from her elder sister.

# Prologue, Part 2

## Adjusting

Applejack awoke with the first rays of morning light, just as she always did. She had slept surprisingly well, despite being in a place she was mostly unfamiliar with. The luxurious bed was most likely the cause behind her restful sleep.

Who knew that pegasi down made for such comfortable pillows?

Stretching her legs as she slipped out from her covers, she almost fell to the ground. Still getting adjusted to her new body frame, she took careful steps towards the bathroom connected to her bedroom. She quickly began washing her face and combing her mane before tying it into a loose ponytail. For a finishing touch, the alicorn picked up her stetson hat, only to pause and look at her long horn resting on top of her head. She sighed before setting the hat back on its hanger. "Looks like I'll have to get Rarity to look into makin' adjustments for my hat later."

She turned towards the door leading out and opened it, only to be greeted by a stallion in golden armor. One of the Royal Guard ponies, if their appearance was any indication. "Um...can I help you, sir?"

The guard gave a curt bow. "Good morning, your Highness. I'm Captain Spark Fyre, and my team and I have been assigned to accompany you throughout the castle until you make your public appearance in the Canterlot central plaza later today." The stallion looked up and smiled. Princess Twilight suggested to Princess Celestia that you may have desired someone to show you around a little, considering you live in a rather open area back in Ponyville and are rather unfamiliar. "

"She did, huh...?" Applejack inquired while taking in the stallion's features. She noticed the horn on his head, and a vibrant blue lightning bolt cutie mark. He had a dark blue coat, which contrasted greatly to his vibrant orange mane. He appeared to be middle-aged, and while his posture spoke of years of service in the Royal Guard, he had a rather laid back look in his eyes.

“Correct, Milady, though she meant no insult to you. Several guards were directed to Princess Rainbow Dash and Princess Pinkie Pie as well. We’ll be happy to show you around the palace, if you wish. My team should be here shortly, and I can only imagine that you’re quite hungry. If you like, we can escort you to the dining hall.”

The former earth pony turned alicorn didn’t need to give reply; her stomach did the talking. Her insides growled, and she blushed deeply while Spark Fyre simply laughed.

“Oh, pardon me. I...I’m usually up before dawn and havin’ breakfast by this time. My stomach apparently ain’t used to this sudden change in schedule, heheh...”

“No need to apologize, Princess Applejack. I’m an early-riser myself. I can sympathize with you there.” He turned his head at the sound of flapping wings and hooves clopping against the stone floor. “Ah, there you boys are.”

Applejack followed the unicorn’s gaze, noticing three more stallion guards approaching them, one a pegasus and the other two being earth ponies. They all gave bows to Applejack before saluting to their superior.

“Sorry, sir. Lightweight had to use the latrine at the last minute, and we figured it’d be better if we all appeared as a group then wait for a single pony.”

“Right,” Spark Fyre began with an authoritative tone. “It will be overlooked this time, considering we’re running on a unplanned schedule right now.” He turned to Applejack once more and grinned. “Milady, these boys are my charges. Meet Lightweight, Scrappy, and Quick Wit. They’re the finest greenhorns to join the castle’s guard in the past five years.”

“Geesh, Sir, you really know how to sugarcoat things.” joked one of the earth ponies, whose coat was a light brown with a copper-red mane.

“Shut up, Scrappy, he’s trying to make us look good.” grumbled the other gray bodied, white and yellow maned earth pony, who Applejack concluded was Quick Wit.



Applejack grinned as the three other guards gave respective bows. "Pleasure makin' your acquaintances. Now, first order of business...you were saying somethin' 'bout the dining hall and breakfast?"

"Of course. Right this way, your Highness." Spark Fyre answered, and began making his way down the hall with Applejack close behind. The three other stallions automatically moved to flank either side of her.

No more than two minutes passed before Spark Fyre led Applejack into a spacious dining hall. She looked around, and was surprised to see several ponies walking back and forth from a large oak table to what she could only assume to be the kitchen. The smell of pancakes, fresh fruits, and light greens wafted through the air, teasing her nostrils. Again, her stomach growled, a bit louder this time.

"Anything in particular that you're hungry for, Milady?" Spark Fyre asked, trying his best to stifle the chuckle in the back of his throat. "The chefs here are some of the best in Equestria, and can have almost anything you desire ready in no time."

The former farm pony gave a shake. "Ah'll just have a few pancakes to start things off...maybe ten will do for starters."

Spark Fyre faltered. "Right, I'll just...wait...you mean ten *whole* pancakes?"

"Yep." Applejack repeated with a nod.

Only years of service under Celestia kept him from questioning the newly crowned princess's eating habits. Alicorns didn't always follow logic in his book, so this was merely another one of those incidents. "A-as you wish, Milady." He made his way towards the kitchen while the trio of younger stallions continued to remain at Applejack's side."

"So..." Applejack began. "...you colts are fresh from the recruitin' batch, huh?"

"Yes, your Highness." Quick Wit answered.

"Must have been tough gettin' into the service, huh?"

Scrappy snorted. "Hardly. Equestria's been peaceful for over several hundred years now. The need for an army is more for presence than

actual defense. I went through basic training in a little over three month's time, then got picked up by Captain Spark Fyre shortly after. Lightweight took about four months, and Quick Wit took about seven, though that's because he was apparently qualified for special training."

"I was sent to Advanced Military Tactical Training, Scrappy. The least you could do is know what you're talking about before you go spouting your mouth off like that." The earth pony guard frowned before giving a curt bow to Applejack. "One thousand pardons, your Highness. Scrappy's a bit of an idiot at times."

"Basic trainin' huh? You all took different classes though, that right?" She received nods from the three stallions. "I guess that makes some sense. I wonder if..." Her voice trailed off as she spotted two familiar faces on the other side of the massive dining hall. "Well shoot, I thought I was goin' to be the first up at this hour. Hey, Twilight!"

A lavender alicorn, who was currently occupied with looking out one of the large windows of the dining hall, perked up at the calling of her name. She, as well as the white alicorn with a flowing mane resembling the dawn's light, both turned to the voice of the orange alicorn. "Good morning, Applejack. I was wondering when you'd be awake."

Applejack smiled before turning to greet Celestia. She was about to bow when the Sun Princess held up a hoof. "No need for that, Applejack. As I have said before, we're equals now. All of us."

"Heh, right, old habits die hard, I guess..." Applejack blushed a bit. "Well, I guess I should've expected *you* to be up already, Prin...er...Celestia."

The white alicorn gave a small smile. "I was just helping Twilight figure out how to use her new powers."

"It's pretty difficult..." Twilight mumbled as she looked down. "Thanks for the help, Princess Celestia."

"You're quite welcome, Twilight. I believe I mentioned before to you as well that you can stop with the Princess Celestia business. Celestia will do just fine."

"I...I know, but...it still feels weird." Twilight sighed. "You've always been 'Princess' Celestia to me."

For a brief moment Celestia frowned, and Applejack thought she saw something in the alicorn's eyes. A flash of sadness...maybe something else, she wasn't sure, but before she could think further on it the Princess of the Sun smiled and gave an understanding nod. "It's fine, Twilight, but do try to work on it. Ponies will have a harder time seeing you as a ruler if you still refer to me as a superior."

Twilight blushed a little. "I'll try and get used to it."

Celestia smiled gently. "That's all I ask." She turned her attention to the three guards who were currently arguing over some matter or another. "I see you're getting along swimmingly with the guards. That's good, that could help you with nominating ponies when you decide to form your Honor Guard."

The orange alicorn blinked several times before raising an eyebrow. "Honor Guard? You mean I'm goin' to have my own troop of ponies?"

Celestia nodded. "Correct, whatever number of guards you wish to have, within reasonable limits at least. For instance, Luna currently has about fifty soldiers in her Honor Guard. They're your personal soldiers, and if they agree, will pledge their loyalty explicitly to you. Think of them as modern day knights."

"Huh...that's kinda neat, but I don' know if I need a bunch of ponies followin' me 'round all the time."

"Of course, privacy is a necessity for anypony, Applejack. They'll more or less escort you whenever you make a trip to some town or city, or whenever you personally attend a festival or public hearing, or whenever you're holding court for the public." Celestia watched the young stallions slowly making their way to Applejack's side. "Just keep this in mind, Applejack. Your guards will keep you safe if you wish, but they'll also be willing to offer you a friendly shoulder to lean on if you get to know them well enough."

"What about you...um...Celestia?" Twilight asked. "How many guards do you have in your Honor Guard?"

“Ah, well right now Captain Lily Wing is the only actual soldier who serves in my Honor Guard, but I often ask other ponies to accompany me whenever I travel, with or without Luna.”

Applejack nodded before turning to see Spark Fyre approaching her, pausing to reprimand the three stallions for not acting like proper guards and keeping a good image. Her mind began to ponder on the subject. Would these four be possible candidates for her Honor Guard?

“Princess Applejack, your breakfast is ready.” Spark Fyre stated, pointing a hoof towards a healthy stack of pancakes.

Well, maybe she would focus on breakfast first.

Sweetie Belle awoke to the comforting warmth of her sister lying beside her. A single foreleg was draped over the filly while one of Rarity's wings seemed to be blanketing her. Closing her eyes and sighing contently, Sweetie Belle snuggled closer to her sister, causing the alicorn to mumble something as she continued to lightly snore.

Rarity used to let Sweetie Belle sleep with her back when she was still only a few years old. Namely whenever there were thunderstorms or when she had a bad dream. While Rarity was a sometimes a bit of a pushy pony when it came to behaving like ‘a proper pony’, she was never above pampering her little sister. It had been that way for as long as Sweetie Belle could remember.

One azure eye opened, then another. Rarity let out a quiet yawn before looking to the sleepy mass lying beside her. Sweetie Belle gave her a soft smile before giggling.

“What’s so funny?” Rarity asked sleepily. She could see where Sweetie Belle’s eyes were looking, so she had a fairly good idea.

“You’ve got really funny bed-mane look right now.”

Typically, having a mussed up mane would cause Rarity stress to no end, but waking up in the morning was an entirely different thing for her. She simply laughed while slowly stretching her legs (and wings). “Well, you’re one to talk, Little Miss Frizzy Head.”

Sweetie Belle giggled more as Rarity ran a hoof through her messed up mane. The two eventually hauled themselves out of the luxurious bed and headed to the bathroom. She did a quick brushing job on Sweetie Belle's mane before attending to her own. After she finished, the two made their way down the corridors leading to the dining hall. The sound of laughter could be heard echoing from within, several voices belonging to ponies Rarity easily recognized as those of her friends.

"Good morning, Princess Rarity and Lady Sweetie Belle." greeted one of the two guards standing at the dining hall entrance.

"Good morning to you, fine sir." Rarity and her sister gave a small curtsy. "I trust the others have already begun eating breakfast?"

"Princess Celestia is an early riser by necessity, so she ate a few hours ago, along with Princess Twilight Sparkle and Princess Applejack. I believe Princess Pinkie Pie was seen bouncing into the dining hall before I took my shift, and Princess Fluttershy just entered the dining hall no more than ten minutes ago. I'm unsure about Princess Rainbow Dash though."

Rarity was impressed; the guards already knew their names. She would have to compliment Celestia and Luna on the quality of their guards around here. Speaking of Luna...

"Ah, what about Luna? Is she awake yet?"

The guard smiled a little before laughing. "Typically Princess Luna won't be awake until four or five in the afternoon, sometimes earlier, sometimes much later. Her sleep cycle has always been a precarious one, according to what Princess Celestia has told us. She tends to stay up late no matter what though, and is usually holding late-night audiences for ponies because of that."

"I see, well I'll just have to see about getting those alterations on her dress done later. Come, Sweetie Belle, I smell pancakes."

Sweetie Belle was all too eager to oblige.

Rarity and Sweetie Belle entered the dining hall, and were greeted to the sight of Applejack sitting in front of a rather healthy stack of pancakes saturated in maple syrup. Judging from the stack of dirty plates next to her, this wasn't her first helping.

“Your Highness, while it’s not my place to question your diet, don’t you think that much syrup is unhealthy?”

The orange alicorn just chuckled. “Heheh, don’t you worry none, Spark Fyre. I don’ have maple syrup that often back home, so this is more of a treat for me than anything else.” She licked her lips before tying a napkin around her neck. She then turned her attention to the fork and knife lying beside the table, an apprehensive look forming on her face. She closed her eyes while her brows knitted in concentration. The silverware gave off a faint glow before rocketing into the air and embedding itself into the ceiling. Applejack’s eyes opened and she cursed before closing her eyes again. The silverware promptly dislodged itself course and shot downward into the table.

“Ah, confound it, I can’t do magic for the life of me.”

Celestia, who had watched the ordeal with a small smile on her face, chuckled quietly. “Give it time, Applejack. I wasn’t that great at magic too when I was first learning. Considering that you moved the silverware on your first try says a lot. You already have a basic understanding of what you have to do. Just give it time.”

Applejack grumbled something while deciding to instead eat the good old fashion earth pony way. She took a delicate bite out of a pancake, being as careful as possible not to get any syrup on her face as she did so. She figured that with being a princess she may as well demonstrate proper table manners while eating.

As for Pinkie Pie, she was eating with a bit less etiquette, a small glob of brown sugar oatmeal adorning her face as she happily ate.

Soon Rarity and Sweetie Belle were seated at the table directly across from Celestia and Twilight. “So, Princess Celestia, I was curious as to what exactly we’ll be doing at the central plaza, other than introducing ourselves.”

“Please, Rarity, Celestia will do just fine.” Celestia said. “As far as what this public appearance goes, I will simply explain the reason for you six being alicorns now, and what changes will take place. Ponies are going to be curious when I tell them why I’m only in charge of maintaining the heat and direction of the sun’s rays, after all.” She looked to Twilight, who dropped her gaze a bit while smiling bashfully. “By the way, Twilight, that

was a good first attempt at rotating the planet this morning, despite what you may think. I'm truly proud of you."

"Thank you Pr...Celestia." Twilight murmured while looking up. "I'll get better, I promise."

"I know you will, Twilight, that's why you were chosen for this task." Celestia gazed across the table to the other mares. "Have any of you experienced anything relating to your powers yet?"

"Well...um..." the group turned to Fluttershy, who was blushing as she noticed she was the center of attention. "I...well, when I woke up this morning I could...I'm not sure how to put this, but I *felt* the animals nearby. I could sense every single little bird, bunny, and insect, and pretty much everything within Canterlot. I also could tell how the plants were doing in the garden just by looking at them." She smiled a little as she continued. "Needless to say, Mr. Hayseed is doing a wonderful job at taking care of the garden."

The Princess of the Sun smiled. "Yes, his family has worked for the castle for almost five generations now. The Hayseeds are truly a gifted bunch of gardeners."

"I had this weird feeling when I woke up this morning." Pinkie Pie began as she looked up from her oatmeal. "I felt all happy one moment, then grumpy the next, then nervous, then sad. I was really, really confused, but then I was fine!" She frowned. "I thought I was going cookoo for a moment!"

"That sounds awfully confusing." Fluttershy commented.

"I know, right? That's why it was a weird feeling! Weirder than my pinkie-sense!" She tapped her chin thoughtfully. "I *think*, and this may sound crazy, that all those emotions were coming from other ponies! Like right now, *I'm* feeling happy, but in the back of my mind I'm annoyed too. That's probably from Applejack because she's got bad table manners, hehehe!" She giggled as the orange mare cast a weak glare towards her direction. "Come on, AJ, there's no reason to be a slumpy-grumpy! It's a new day, and we're going to introduce ourselves to the ponies of Canterlot!!"

Despite being upset with her inability to control her magic, Applejack managed to find herself smiling. Whether it was because of Pinkie Pie's magic or just the way the party pony was able to make you smile, she didn't know, but it was working. "Yer right, Sugarcube. I'll get this magic stuff down soon enough."

Rarity and Applejack both felt nothing in relation to magic today, but Celestia assured them it would come with time. It was almost eleven in the morning when one Rainbow Dash trotted slowly into the dining hall, yawning every couple of steps while rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. "Mornin'..."

The mares couldn't help but snicker at Rainbow's appearance. Her wild mane was matted on one side and sticking up in random spots while feathers were poking out in odd directions, indicating she had been tossing in her sleep.

"Well, you look like you slept well." Twilight commented as she tried to suppress a laugh.

Rainbow rolled her eyes. "Yeah, yeah, laugh it up. My hair is a mess, so what?" She slumped down into her seat and helped herself to some wheat bread and raspberry jam.

"Ohhh, now I'm feeling frumpy. Rainbow Dash, cheer up!"

The chromatic alicorn sighed while rubbing her eyes. "Nn...gimme a few minutes."

After the ponies had finished their first meal of the day, Celestia urged them to all go about preparing themselves for the public appearance, which would be held in less than a couple of hours.

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Before they knew it, it was one in the afternoon and the six newly crowned princesses were standing outside the main doors leading out to Canterlot. The mares all had varying looks about them, from Pinkie Pie's exuberant bouncing to Fluttershy's nervous scratching at the carpet while trying to appear as small as possible.



Celestia, who was standing before them all, gave them what she hoped was a reassuring smile. "Girls, don't worry. I'll do most of the talking, alright? If anypony has questions directed towards any of you in particular, you can choose to answer them if you wish, though I'd recommend keeping the answers as brief as possible." She looked over all of them once more, her smile growing slightly. "You all look wonderful, by the way."

The six had decided to wear their respective Elements of Harmony, along with adornments selected by Luna and Celestia themselves. Their regalia matched that of Celestia and Luna's though there were a few subtle differences if one looked.

Twilight wore a golden chest plate and shoes that were complimented by a small cape tied around her waist that shined a brilliant lavender hue. The tiara of Magic rested on top of her head, sparkling in the natural light that shined through the windows of the castle, making her appear more regal than she could have ever thought possible.

Rainbow Dash wore her necklace of Loyalty and golden regalia like that of Twilight. In place of a crown were golden leaves that strongly resembled those that were part of her Grand Galloping Gala outfit.

Pinkie Pie's blue necklace of Laughter was easily visible in contrast to her pink coat. She wore a gold crown and had a chest plate and shoes that were a vibrant, metallic pink hue that matched the color of her mane.

Fluttershy wore no crown, opting instead for a small forehead tiara and regalia of silver that resembled Luna's own design. The tiara had a raindrop diamond of pink that hung loosely to the woven jewelry, complimenting the yellow alicorn's graceful figure perfectly. Her butterfly shaped necklace of Kindness could be seen hanging around her neck as well for a finishing touch.

Applejack was dressed modestly compared to the others, wearing only a chest plate and shoes made of gold. She had her stetson hat tied around her neck by a string that was accompanied by the Element of Honesty, and it appeared that the orange pony had taken the time to groom her mane, which was now gleaming in the midday sunlight.

Last was Rarity, who had dressed up the most of the group. She wore regalia that shined a bright violet color and a golden crown similar to Celestia's own rested on her head. Aside from this, she had on an elegant,

feathered cape of royal blue that draped her sides and decorative leg armor of the same color as her regalia. Her necklace of Generosity shined vibrantly against her white fur coat.

“Well,” Celestia began. “We had best not keeping our citizens waiting.”

The seven princesses were quickly surrounded by guards of varying rank and decorum as the doors opened. The iron hinges creaked under the strain before several Royal Guard ponies moved forward, followed by Celestia, then the other six.

“Alright, ponies!” barked out a feminine voice. The six alicorns looked ahead to see that Captain Lily Wing was the owner of the voice. “This is a standard crowd control and escort procedure, but with our new co-rulers we need to cover more ground. If I so much as see a stray leaf touch their backs, I’ll have every single one of you running hay bails up and down Canterlot peak until sundown tomorrow! Are we clear?!”

“Sir, yes, sir!” shouted the guards, causing Fluttershy to jump.

“Good. Now, forward, march!!”

Within seconds the small herd of ponies was marching out of the castle and towards the actual city of Canterlot. The denizens of the capital stopped to gaze briefly at Celestia before returning to whatever task they were taking care, only to do a double take when they noticed five new alicorns following behind her. By the time they reached the central plaza, a small crowd of mostly unicorns, a few pegasi, and the occasional earth pony, was following behind them. The Royal Guard parted at the front to allow Celestia and the other six to make their way towards a small platform. Celestia walked up to the center of the white stone platform before looking to Twilight and the others, giving them an expectant smile.

Twilight was the first to join her side, along with Pinkie Pie, and then the rest of the alicorn mares. Celestia gazed over the large mass of equines now gathered around the platform while the Royal Guard stood at all points, providing a barrier between the princesses and the public.

“Do we really need these many guards, your Majesty?” asked Rarity in a whisper. “I mean...I know we’re part of the reason for the large number, but still...”

Celestia gave a small nod while keeping her gaze on the growing crowd of Canterlot inhabitants. "Unfortunately, Rarity, the crowds can grow excited quickly if I bring news, good or bad, to them. Luna was almost suffocated by press when she returned, and you can imagine how that must have been after ages of isolation..."

Rarity blinked before looking forward, only to gasp. In the span of a minute, the plaza had become flooded with ponies. It was like they were riding on the waves of a pastel sea.

Celestia raised a hoof in a gesture requesting the ponies to quiet down. The citizens slowly quieted, though there was still the background buzz of individual conversations that could be heard. "Greetings, everypony." Celestia smiled brightly as the ponies all slowly bowed to her while she gave a respectful nod in return. "I come to you all with wonderful and exciting news. In case any of you had not yet noticed, there are six more alicorns beside me today. Some of you may recognize them, others may not. Today, I am honored to introduce you to your future co-rulers of Equestria!"

The crowd erupted into gasps, shouts of excitement and confusion, and even the occasional whinny. She raised her hoof, though it took much longer for the crowds to grow quiet this time. "These six mares standing before you are the bearers of the Elements of Harmony, and as most of you I hope know, the ones responsible for defeating Nightmare Moon and helping return my beloved sister to us all." She repeated the silencing gesture again, a patient smile still on her face as she waited for them to let her continue. "The Elements of Harmony have dictated that the world shall begin going through various changes, and that new rulers are needed to help guide the planet." She took a step to the side before continuing her speech. "Ladies and gentleponies, I present to you the Spirits of Harmony, and new co-rulers of Equestria!"

There was an eruption of cheers that had reached deafening levels. Celestia simply looked to the six and smiled before nodding. Twilight took the cue and stepped forward while trying to quell the butterflies dancing in her stomach. She applied a small level of magic to her vocal chords to help amplify her voice. "Good day, everypony. I-I am Twilight Sparkle, and I was actually born and raised here in Canterlot." She gave a small nod as the crowds continued to stomp the ground in applause. "I...look forward to my new calling, and will do all I can to serve the kingdom!"

She quickly backed up, almost stumbling into Celestia, who managed to catch her with a hoof. The lavender alicorn gave her an embarrassed grin before looking to the rest of her friends. They all looked about as nervous as she was, their eyes glued to the crowd before them. Just when she was beginning to worry, Pinkie Pie bounced forward in a single hop and spoke. "Hi, everyone! I'm Pinkie Pie, and I'm from Ponyville. I'm really, really excited to help run the kingdom! Oh, before I forget, we'll be throwing a HUGE party in the castle when I get a date set up, and everypony is invited! Free cake and ice cream for everyone! See you there!!"

The crowd went quiet, the occasional grunt of confusion being heard in the mass of ponies.

Then one pony, a young unicorn stallion, shouted. "Yeah! Party at Canterlot Castle!!"

The crowd decided to go with the flow, and once more erupted into cheers. Pinkie Pie grinned from ear to ear and flared her wings while joining the celebration. She eventually took her place in the back, but not before giving Rarity a nudge forward.

"Goodness, Pinkie, was that really necessary? A true princess wouldn't be so-" She almost bit her tongue as she faced the masses. "Er..." She cleared her throat, took a calming breath, and spoke. "Salutations, my fellow ponies. I am Rarity, and it is truly an honor to be given this responsibility. I look forward to getting to know this wonderful city better, as well as the rest of Equestria." She gave a low curtsy. "Princess Rarity is at your kingdom's service!"

As the crowd continued their applause, Rainbow Dash decided to take her turn. She grinned before flaring her wings fully, eliciting several 'ooh's and 'aah's from the ponies. "Hey, everypony, my name is Rainbow Dash, winner of last year's Best Young Flyer Competition!" There were a few cheers from the crowd, namely the pegasi. She grinned while continuing. "I promise that I'll do my absolute best as a princess of Equestria, and I never go back on my word!" She smiled brightly as the crowd continued cheering, and even gave a little kick into the air with her forelegs before turning around and joining the others.

Applejack and Fluttershy were frozen in place. Fluttershy's eyes darted from one corner of the plaza to the other while Applejack was staring off in space, her mind racing.

"Fluttershy..." Celestia whispered. "Go on. We're right here with you."

"Eep!" the yellow alicorn shrunk back a little. She looked up to see the reassuring smiles of Pinkie, Rainbow, Twilight, and Rarity. Her confidence grew a little, and she slowly made her way to the front. "U-um..." The crowd grew incredibly silent as the ponies struggled to hear her. "H-h-hello. M-my name is...Fluttershy. I...um...well, I'm honored to be made a princess of Equestria...I guess..." She slowly backed up. "Th-thank you."

Among the applause, several adoring 'aww's could be heard. She was thankful that Rarity decided to rest a wing over her, providing her with something to hide under.

The orange alicorn blinked, realizing she had yet to introduce herself. Even Fluttershy managed to muster up enough courage to speak in front of all these ponies! She sucked in a deep breath before exhaling slowly. She stepped forward, knees a little wobbly, and spoke. "Hi, everypony. Mah name is Applejack, an' before yesterday I was just yer run o' the mill farmer who helped tend to Sweet Apple Acres over in Ponyville." She grinned as several faces in the crowd lit up in recognition of the orchard name. "Now, I might not be experienced in the whole bureaucracy thing an' what have you, but I promise to learn my role and help out in whatever way I can. Thank you." She gave a slow nod as the ponies continued to cheer, several even letting out a whoop and 'yeehaw', followed by hats being thrown into the air.

Celestia beamed brightly at the orange mare before stepping forward. Applejack gave a small nod before walking back to her place beside her friends. The Princess of the Sun waited until the cheers died down before speaking once again.

The Princess of the Sun spoke at length of how she and her sister would continue to assist in the running of the kingdom, but also made it clear that the other six were true rulers of Equestria and were to be respected as such. "Thank you for giving us your time, my little ponies. These changes will take time, mind you, and my sister and I will do all we can to help your new co-rulers learn their responsibilities. I ask that you all

welcome them with the kindness that Equestria is known for. Thank you, and I wish you all a pleasant rest of the day!”

A final cheer that dwarfed all previous ones shook the plaza, rattling the bones of the six mares as they gave courteous nods to their new subjects. Within less than ten minutes, the Royal Guard had managed to create a path back to the castle, and usher the royal ponies back into the white stone walls.

As soon as they were inside the castle walls, Celestia turned to Lily Wing. “Thank you for your help today, Captain. You may have the rest of the day off.” Celestia said as she walked into the castle entrance chambers. “Oh, and send a messenger to find Lady Sweetie Belle. I believe she was escorted to the central plaza by Azure Skye and Stalwart to the plaza, right Rarity?”

Rarity gave a nod. “Yes, I wanted to avoid her becoming caught up in the publicity. Poor dear would be overwhelmed and I fear she’d get panicky. Captain Azure Skye said she would be waiting in the southern gate entrance chambers with my sister if I remember correctly.”

Celestia turned back to Lily Wing, who simply gave a salute before going to find a messenger pony to retrieve Sweetie Belle.

“Celestia?”

The ancient equine looked to see Applejack shuffling her hooves distractedly. “Yes, Applejack?”

“Ah...” She took in a deep breath before continuing. “How many public appearances like that will we have to make?”

“Well, I know how it feels to make a speech in front of so many ponies, but I think it would be a good idea to at least visit a few of the other towns and cities of Equestria. Manehattan will be an necessary one, as will Fillydelphia, perhaps we’ll also stop by Hoofington. I like to call those cities the ‘Big Three’ since they hold the three largest populations respectively within the kingdom.”

“W-wait, we’re going to have to visit Manehattan???” Rainbow spoke up, her voice shaky as her knees. “I...uh, can we maybe make that the last visit?”

Celestia tried to hide the amusement in her voice from the distraught ponies. "It's alright, Rainbow Dash. I promise that you'll have all the time you need to prepare a speech for a city like Manehattan. I used to be afraid of public speaking, too."

Twilight raised an eyebrow. "Really? Prin...Celestia, you're so good at it though. Why would you be afraid of something like that? Everypony respects you so much."

Celestia chuckled while looking out a window to the midday sky. "Truth be told, Twilight, back when Luna and I had first become the diarchs of Equestria I was quite the stage-frightened pony. Luna was also scared stiff at the idea of speaking before crowds of hundreds of ponies, being the timid filly that she was, and I was only slightly better. While she was unable to form a single word I was able to form a half-way coherent sentence if I was lucky." She sighed. "However, the staff of the castle at the time helped tutor me on proper public speaking, what to do and what not to do, among other things. You remember the *Equine Manifesto*, don't you Twilight?"

"Oh, yes, it's probably one of the most passionate speeches you've ever given!" Twilight's eyes lit up, and Celestia realized a little too late what she had unleashed. "The desire for civil rights to be a given right and not a privilege to everypony, the wish for treaties to be rewritten with the neighboring lands, and have equal representation of the various pony settlements in the Equestrian parliament-"

A gentle hoof rested on the lavender alicorn's shoulder. She paused to see Celestia giving her a look that hid laughter, asking her to hold off on her praise for now. "Um...yes, I remember your speech."

A few of the mares laughed quietly while Twilight blushed. Celestia just nodded before continuing. "Right, and while you may view it as one of my best works of writing, I will be the first to admit that it had taken me almost a year to muster up the courage to deliver it to the ponies of Equestria. I kept putting it off, or lost my nerve, but eventually several dozen of the castle attendants and guards decided to serve as my first audience. I began small, then more ponies would listen, until eventually I was giving the speech to the entire city of Fillydelphia, which at the time was the largest city in Equestria."

She gained a far-off look for several moments before laughing. "When Luna returned, one of the first things she read was that speech. She couldn't believe that I had managed to give such a speech in front of so many ponies. It was a radical proposition on the change of government, and it was given in front of the largest population of ponies at the time." She smiled. "Luna's still a bit shy in regards to public appearances, unfortunately, but her desire to be with her fellow ponies and the craving to learn about all the changes in society that she missed out on has stamped out most of that fear."

"So you see, girls, while it can be a bit intimidating to stand before enormous crowds of ponies and give a speech, the only way one can get better at it is with practice."

"Well I thought it was lots of fun! We got to see a whole bunch of new ponies, and now they all know about the party in the castle! It's going to be so much fun!" Pinkie Pie cheered.

Celestia found her smile widening a little as the pink alicorn giggled. "Yes, Pinkie Pie, that's very true. Your ability to stand before such a large crowd without the slightest bit of insecurity is a true mark of your ability to connect with other ponies."

"I just thought about what I wanted to say, and said it! That's all." Pinkie Pie beamed. "My Granny Pie always told me that I shouldn't be afraid to make mistakes, because I can only learn from them!"

"That's a wise bit of advice, Pinkie Pie." Celestia agreed. "Perhaps you can help the others learn to conquer their stage fright?"

"Ohhhh, I'd love to!"

Further conversation was cut off as the doors opened. A messenger pony cleared his throat before speaking. "Your Majesties, Lady Sweetie Belle has arrived."

The young unicorn filly walked into the chamber, followed by two stallions who the six could only assume were Azure Skye and Stalwart. Upon seeing Rarity, Sweetie Belle quickened her pace before reaching her sister and embracing her. "That was a great speech, Rarity!"



While the fashionista wasn't entirely in agreement with the claim, the praise still meant a lot to her when it came from Sweetie Belle. She nuzzled her sister before speaking to the guards. "I trust she was well behaved?"

Azure Skye, a rather muscular pegasus, gave a small smile. "Lady Sweetie Belle was a perfect model of how a proper filly behaves..." He gave the little filly a sly grin before continuing. "...though I think she's a little jealous of Princess Celestia's 'pretty mane', as she so eloquently put it."

Sweetie Belle gasped. "Azure, you said you wouldn't tell!"

The stallion laughed. "No, Stalwart said that. I never made such a promise."

Now embarrassed and blushing, Sweetie Belle hid behind her sister's legs as Celestia looked down to her with that ever-present smile of hers. "Thank you for the compliment, Sweetie Belle. You shouldn't be jealous, though; your mane is just as beautiful."

Sweetie Belle gave out a bashful thanks before walking out from under Rarity's legs. After the laughter had calmed down, Celestia decided to speak up. "Well, I suppose now is as good a time as any to get you all acquainted with some of the duties you'll have to perform during the time that the castle is open to the public." With that, Celestia lead them to the throne room while explaining the intricacies of being a co-ruler of Equestria.

One day had passed since the public appearance in Canterlot, and already Twilight found herself sitting beside Luna during the late hours of the castle's public hours. She was listening intently as a young mare from Fillydelphia nervously asked for some funding towards in agricultural research which would hopefully lead to better yields of corn and wheat for future harvests. She explained the details to Twilight, the lavender alicorn and Princess of the Moon both studying the visual aids their visitor provided as the mare continued to explain how much this would cost to fund.

"...I realize this is a bit of a risky project to fund, but...if we can get the irrigation system made and the natural fertilizer is a success...then we could feed twice as many ponies throughout all of Equestria within six years' time." the Earth pony, Twilight believed was named Silver Trowel, finished her presentation and gave the princesses a hopeful look.

Luna smiled after setting the small pamphlet down, and turned to Twilight. "Well, I think this is a good venture to invest in, don't you?"

Twilight studied the pamphlet floating before her more intently before looking to the mare kindly. "Silver Trowel, correct?"

"Y-yes, Princess Twilight Sparkle." the Earth pony replied with a bow.

Twilight hummed as she looked up to the ceiling in thought. "I think this is a good idea as well, however...I'm not entirely certain about this irrigation system, if only because of the possibility that it could fail, or that the fertilizer could drain into the water itself and possibly get into the local drinking water."

Silver Trowel sighed. "Yes...there is a risk involved, but as I mentioned, the rewards if this research project were to be a success would be great."

"How much of this were you asking the Royal Treasury to fund?"

Silver Trowel looked down. "About...about seventy percent, your Highness. It would come out to about seven hundred-fifty thousand bits, perhaps a bit more."

Luna gave a nod. "That is a reasonable sum of money, but considering the amount of work you'd be putting into this, I can understand the costs." She looked towards her co-ruler. "What's on your mind, Twilight?"

"Well..." Twilight looked towards the door leading to the royal chambers where most of the others were sleeping. "I think that while this is a good idea, you could probably benefit from inquiring further on the matter with Princess Applejack. She's a splendid farmer, and considering what her domain of magic encompasses, she would probably know a few things about irrigation farming. Still, I think we can provide this much money for your group's research, Miss Silver Trowel. You have my approval."

"As do I. Considering we are the only two giving audience right now for open court, I believe that means your request has been accepted." Luna smiled as the young mare standing before her beamed.

“Oh, th-thank you, your Majesties! I-I will be sure to seek out Princess Applejack’s advice on the matter during my stay in Canterlot. If by chance, would either of you know when she’s available?”

“She’s typically awake by dawn, and I’m sure if you can get here early enough, whoever is holding court at the time can find her for you.”

Silver Trowel bowed again as Twilight and Luna filled out the proper paperwork stating she had their approval for funding from the Royal Treasury, and made her way out shortly after.

Twilight looked at the clock. “A quarter after nine already?” She sighed. “We go until ten, right?”

“Yes, but we usually end early, considering we rarely get any ponies after eight at night.” Luna replied before looking to the pony guards at the door. “Are there any other visitors?”

“Yes, Milady. A unicorn couple by the names of Night Light and Shimmer Tail.”

Luna noticed Twilight visibly perk up at the mention of the guests’ names. “My parents are here?” She looked to the Princess of the Night and smiled. “I...Princess...you don’t mind if-?”

Luna chuckled. “Not at all. As I said, we’re usually done with most business by eight. Do you want some time alone with the family?”

“No, please, I’d actually love to introduce you to them.” Twilight nodded to the guard. “Please let them enter.”

The doors opened, and sure enough, there were [Twilight's parents](#). The lavender alicorn hopped down from her seat at the throne and met her parents halfway. She was met with a welcoming embrace from the two unicorns.

“Well, Shimmer, I never expected our little girl to get this big.” Night Light joked with a smile. “We just got your letter today. We had been gone on vacation for the past week in Hoofington, and got back a little over an hour ago.”

Shimmer Tail nuzzled her much taller daughter and smiled. “We just...we couldn’t believe it, so we had to see it for ourselves.” Twilight

watched as her mother began tearing up. "Oh, Twilight...your father and I are so proud of you."

Twilight blushed a bit as Shimmer Tail began to nuzzle her gently while calling her 'my little baby filly'. She looked over her shoulder to see Luna watching in amusement, saying nothing while her eyes twinkled with hidden laughter.

"Um...Mom, Dad, this is Princess Luna."

The two unicorns bowed while Luna gave them nods. "A wonderful pleasure to finally meet the Princess of the Night, your Highness." Night Light commented. "I'm actually a part of the staff at the Canterlot Observatory, and a major fan of your work, namely the nebulae. It's amazing how many newly formed stars can cluster together in such a small area, considering how large I'm particularly fascinated by how well you've managed to make the Horsehead Nebula look so detailed when it's seen in front of the hydrogen gas clouds at-"

"Dear, you're doing it again." Shimmer Tail said with a tolerant smile. Night Light blinked before giving an apologetic smile.

"My deepest apologies, your Majesty. I tend to go off on tangents when I get caught up with discussions." He looked to his much taller daughter and grinned. "I think Twilight got that from me. Luckily her mother's looks more than make-up for it."

"Daaad..." Twilight groaned while the blue unicorn stallion chuckled good-naturedly.

Luna seemed to be enjoying the family's interactions, though. "Your daughter has been a truly helpful mare for my sister and I. I owe her much, and it is a true honor to be working beside her."

Shimmer Tail and Night Light blinked several times, surprised by the midnight alicorn's words. "W-well, that's wonderful to hear, you're Highness." Twilight's mother stated while looking to her daughter and giving her a proud smile of her own. "Though I do think Princess Celestia had just as much of a part in helping Twilight grow up."

It could have been a trick of the dimmed lighting of the throne room, but for a moment Luna thought she saw sadness in the eyes of the two

parents as they looked to Twilight, who was currently occupied with adjusting the Tiara of Magic on her head. Whether they were troubled by something or not, Luna barely had time to think on it as the two unicorns continued to talk with their daughter. Eventually, Luna returned to her spot in the throne while Twilight and her parents went off to one end of the hall and had a more private chat. By the time Twilight returned to Luna, it was close to midnight. Night Light and Shimmer Tail each gave Luna a deep bow before exiting the throne room and telling Twilight they'd stop by later this week when she was available.

Luna turned her attention to her peer, and was taken by surprise when she saw Twilight quietly shedding tears. "Twilight Sparkle, what's wrong?"

The lavender alicorn smiled, though, much to her surprise. "H-huh? Oh!" She wiped her eyes with a wing. "It's...childish, really."

"I doubt that is the case. Please, tell me."

Twilight sighed. "I haven't spoken to my parents in person for over five years, Luna. We've kept in contact with each other through letters. Spike transfers letters from me to my parents in the same fashion that he does with Princess Celestia, and vice versa." She frowned a little. "Oh, I wish he was awake right now. Mom and Dad would have loved to see how much he's grown up in the past couple of years."

While Luna wasn't a pony to judge, she couldn't help but ask the following. "Why such a long time since you've spent time with your parents?"

Twilight smiled sadly. "My parents are both very busy ponies. While they work for the capital, they also do a lot of field work for Equestria as well. My father travels across the land to map out stars and make observations with his telescope while my mother is an magical theory researcher as well as a philosopher. That's...part of the reason why I was allowed entry into Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns. In place of paying the rather hefty enrollment fee, the school instead gave me an aptitude test. I passed, obviously, and got to keep Spike and help take care of him."

Luna was surprised by this. "My sister has a fee for teaching magic?" She shook her head. "She never told me of this...it doesn't sound like her at

all, though. I don't mean to be a flatterer or anything, but Celly's always been quite the philanthropist. If it weren't for the ponies' insistence, Celestia and I would not even be wearing these crowns and regalia."

"From what I remember, Princess Celestia told me she didn't like the enrollment fee either, but it does help pay for the professors a little, and help maintain the school."

"Ah, I suppose that makes sense."

An awkward silence permeated through the room for several long moments before the lavender alicorn spoke up again. "Princess Luna...?"

Luna would have corrected Twilight's formality, but looked over the matter, having sensed the hesitancy in Twilight's voice. "Yes, Twilight?"

"I..." She frowned before forcing a smile onto her face. "Never mind. It's nothing important."

The midnight alicorn could have seen the forced smile on her peer's face from a mile away. "Twilight, what's wrong?"

The lavender alicorn answered with a shake of the head. "Oh, there isn't anything wrong, just something silly that I was just curious about...but I think I already know the answer."

"Really?" Luna wasn't convinced.

Twilight nodded. "Yes, I..." She became interested in a spot on the floor suddenly, and her voice dropped ever so slightly. "...like I said, it's nothing important."

Deciding not to press further on the matter, Luna instead changed the subject towards the progress Twilight made in her new magical powers. The lavender mare visibly perked up at this, and began to tell her what she had experienced with her new powers over the past couple of days.

Despite the change in atmosphere, Luna couldn't help but feel a nagging sensation in the back of her mind. Twilight had been troubled by something, and still was from what she could tell. She would have to consult Celestia about it, or perhaps one of her new co-rulers.

For now, though, she only wished to enjoy her time with Twilight Sparkle.

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*One week later...*

Celestia finished listening to a stallion from Hoofington who merely wished to have some renovations done on a rather out of date cobblestone road. The costs would be rather cheap, and Celestia saw no real reason why the request couldn't be accepted. So, she quickly signed the proper forms and turned her attention to the pony sitting beside her.

Pinkie Pie was entertaining one of the ponies waiting to be heard with a tale of an apparent baking mishap about a year ago involving muffins. The event was nothing short of a historical event in Ponyville, according to what she had told them.

"...so I decided to not let Applejack help with baking at the Sugarcube Corner anymore unless she got her rest. The silly-filly was so stubborn and grumpy about getting all those apple trees bucked, even though she was all bucked out!"

The unicorn, who appeared to be a Canterlot local, raised an eyebrow. "I say, that is quite a unfortunate mishap. Surely all the ponies recovered from those muffins, yes?"

"Oh sure! In fact, those muffins are a real hit with non-pony customers, namely dragons...too bad we don't get many dragon customers in Ponyville." Pinkie giggled. "Could you *imagine* how much we'd need to make for a big old dragon? Hehehehe, we'd need a couple wagons of flour and sugar!"

Celestia enjoyed the scene, watching as the stallion and the other ponies nearby chuckled at the thought. "My word, a dragon-sized muffin? Good heavens, we'd need a whole wheat field just to make a baker's dozen."

Pinkie Pie giggled more, and while Celestia would rather let the day pass with laughter and fun stories, she did have matters to attend to. "Excuse me, sir. Did you have something you wished to speak to us about?"

The stallion wiped a tear from his eye after hearing a rather corny joke from Pinkie Pie involving dragon-fueled ovens before nodding. "One thousand pardons, Princess Celestia, but Princess Pinkie Pie appears to have a direct line to my funny bone." He cleared his throat while trying to maintain his composure. His expression became a little more serious, and even Pinkie Pie could sense the pony's demeanor change. Then again, that was part of her magic, Celestia supposed. "I was told to bring this matter up with you, seeing as it could possibly be a diplomatic issue with the Griffons."

Celestia's eyebrows rose. "I see. Please, go on."

The unicorn nodded. "You see, you Majesties, I am Finer Edge, the proprietor of The Iron Shovel. We specialize in crafting various tools for farming and digging, namely shovels and plows. Our metal ore provider is a Griffon, but his company is outside of Equestria's borders. I've been doing business with him for the past ten years now, and while we've had nothing but great business together, he's begun to raise the costs of his ore significantly."

"Well, ore prices have been on the rise recently, Mister Edge."

The unicorn shook his head. "Yes, but that's besides the point. You see, we drew up our contract for the year and he sells his ore to me for a set price per half ton, and it stays that way until next business year when we write up a new contract and negotiate the price." He paused, receiving nods from both princesses to continue. "There's no loophole in the contract that says he can do that, so he's creating problems and breaching our contract by doing so. I've brought this to his attention on three separate occasions, but all have been met with a refusal to lower the price."

Celestia became silent for several long moments. She looked to Pinkie Pie and smiled before speaking. "What do you think we should do about this, Pinkie Pie? We have a pony who is being treated unfairly and a Griffon who only wishes to be able to maintain their business. This is a delicate situation, as you can probably already tell."

Pinkie Pie only grinned. "Maybe we can visit them, or have them visit us? If we just talk to them about it, we could probably get a lot done, don't you think?"



“With all due respect, your Majesty, the Griffon kingdom is a good couple of days flight from here, and that could be more if they travel with chariot.” spoke up Finer Edge.

Pinkie frowned, resting her chin on a hoof and humming. “Well...” She perked up. “If we invite them to Canterlot and throw them a party, maybe they would come anyway! Not a big one, but maybe just a few ponies and Griffons...I just hope they’re not like Gilda...”

The elder princess gained a thoughtful look before nodding to herself. “Mister Edge, thank you for bringing this to our attention. We’ll see to it that proper actions are taken. If you would leave us a way to contact you when this matter is settled, that would be greatly appreciated.”

Finer Edge quirked an eyebrow. “Your Majesty, what do you plan on doing?”

Celestia just smiled. “I believe Pinkie Pie and perhaps myself as well will be taking a short vacation to the Griffon Kingdom. I must admit that quite a bit of time has passed since I last paid them a visit.”

An hour later found Pinkie Pie and Celestia making their way towards the gardens where they had planned on having a light lunch with the others. When they arrived they found a small picnic table to be occupied by their fellow co-rulers.

Pleasantries were shared, most of the talking being done between Rarity, Twilight, Pinkie, and Celestia while the others threw in a little conversation once in awhile.

“So Sweetie Belle seemed quite excited about going to school this morning. Something about giving a report on a family member.” Rarity giggled while dabbing her face with a napkin to wipe away a few stray crumbs of wheat bread. “I only wish that I knew more about my duties so I could give her a more thorough explanation of what I do for the community.”

A rather loud sigh could be heard from the other end of the table, and Pinkie Pie was the first to speak. “Applejack, are you okay?”

“Ah’m fine, Sugarcube.”

Pinkie Pie frowned. "No you're not."

"It's nothin', just a little tired, that's-"

"Applejack, you're making me sad just by looking at you, and that's without listening to my magic."

The orange alicorn gave her a weak glare before grumbling. "Well, since you're so curious..." She set down her hat, which now had a hole to allow her horn to stick through, and continued. "Ah actually got a letter 'bout two days ago from Big Mac. He...well, he suggested that Applebloom interview me for the same report for school, what with me bein' a princess and all. Applebloom flat out refused to, and when Big Mac asked her why she just said she didn' want to, and stormed off to her room."

"Oh dear...did he find out what was wrong?" Fluttershy piped in.

"Yeah...he did." Applejack said, her voice cracking a little. "She said that she wants to interview someone in the family that actually cares 'bout her."

"Oh, Applejack..." Celestia began. "If you need to visit the family, all you need do is ask."

Applejack nodded. "I just...she seemed all fine with it, even after I asked her face to face if she was alrigh' with me leavin' for Canterlot."

"Maybe she was afraid to speak up? I mean...you are her older sister, and I don't think she wanted to make you upset or worried." Luna suggested. "Believe me, I know what it's like to be the youngest."

Celestia gave Luna a small smile before returning her attention to Applejack. "The offer still stands; if you need to see the family, then there's nothing stopping you. I want you to know that."

"I...I think I might need to do that. Big Mac seemed to be worried 'bout her, too." The orange alicorn got up from her spot and gave a weak smile. "If ya'll don't mind, I think I might arrange a carriage to Ponyville and leave this afternoon. Rainbow, I know you an' I were going to visit the Royal Guard barracks together tomorrow mornin' but that may have to wait for another day, that okay with you?"

Rainbow Dash waved a hoof and smiled. "No problem, AJ. Just make sure Applebloom and you work things out, alright?"

The orange alicorn gave a final nod before heading off to the castle, likely to arrange her departure. Soon the others excused themselves, stating they had various things to take care of as well. Only Luna and Celestia remained at the table, sharing a silent conversation with their eyes.

Luna was the first to actually speak. "I think we need to talk to them about the long term obstacles they'll be facing, Celly."

The usually radiant and ever-calm alicorn visibly slouched, her expression taking on a somber look that only one who had lived for eons could wear. "I know...it's just..." She looked to the sun for several long moments before turning to her sister. "What if...what if they become angry with us, and hate us? It's not like we really gave them a choice...even if they did have the option to refuse becoming an alicorn."

"Then that's something we'll just have to bear, sister." Luna said softly. "You know what, though? I don't think that will happen. They are some of the most remarkable ponies I've ever met, and...and I don't think they'd hate us. They may be angry, yes, but...anger fades with time and understanding. You know that better than anyone."

The Princess of the Sun stood up and walked over to her sibling. "I wonder what I would do without you sometimes, Luna."

"What you did while I was on the moon, I imagine." Luna replied with a small chuckle.

"No, I mean...if I never had you with me to begin with. You've...always been that one pony that I could rely on when everything seemed to be going wrong for me." She nuzzled the midnight alicorn and closed her eyes. "We can talk to them when Applejack comes back from seeing her family."

"I think you need to talk to Twilight as well, Celly. She hasn't been showing it, but she seemed to be troubled by something when she saw her parents last week." Luna paused for a moment as Celestia met her gaze. "I also think a *certain* someone needs to have an important talk with Twilight as well."

"I..." Celestia looked away. "That's not an important subject at the moment."

"Celly..." Luna frowned. "If you don't bring it up with her, it'll only eat away at you more. Besides, what's to say it wouldn't work out between you two?"

Celestia was quiet for several long moments. She frowned a little, but upon meeting her sister's eyes again, gave a defeated smile. "I'll talk to her."

Luna quirked an eyebrow.

"Okay...I promise to talk to Twilight about it. Does that work for you?"

"Mm." Luna nodded. "I also think we should address certain things in the Canterlot Statue Garden."

Celestia went silent. "I...yes, I noticed it too. Looks like he's starting to get stronger."

Luna just smiled. "Oh, I wouldn't worry too much about him. Even if he got out...well, I doubt he'd be able to do much to them."

The Princess of the Sun sighed. "I hope you're right, Luna. The last thing we need is for *him* to be running free again."

# Applejack

## The Apple Never Falls Far...

Applejack kept her gaze glued on the horizon ahead. The clouds whipped past her as she let her thoughts wander to the current problems on her mind.

Apple Bloom was, like most fillies of the Apple clan, proud, stubborn, yet through and through, a good hearted pony. If Big Mac's letter was any indication though, the youngest member of Applejack's family was not all that happy with the Princess of the Earth (a title she had apparently received if the way some of her guards addressed her was an indicator).

"Milady?"

Sure, she had the occasional argument with Apple Bloom, and they've exchanged less than pleasant words more than once, but still...

"Er...Princess Applejack...?"

Why didn't Apple Bloom say anything before, though? Was she afraid that the older mare would be angry with her? Did she honestly think of Applejack as a mare with such little concern for her-

"Princess!"

The orange alicorn snapped out of her thoughts as the sound of a pegasus stallion brought her back to reality. "Huh? Oh...sorry 'bout that, Lightweight. I got a lot on my mind at the moment." She gave the young stallion a smile. "What's the problem, Sugarcube?"

Lightweight gave an apologetic smile and nodded. "We're about a minute away from Ponyville. I figured you'd like to know that."

Applejack chanced a peek over the side of the chariot, and noticed familiar landmarks. "Huh...so we are. Well, ya'll can just land near the city hall. I suppose the mayor would like to see me, seeing as I'm droppin' by an' what not."

Lightweight nodded, and the information was quickly relayed to the other pegasi ahead. Sure enough, less than several seconds passed before the chariot made a smooth landing within the center of Ponyville. The residents immediately took notice, most stopping in their tracks and taking a few seconds to look at the strange, yet familiar looking, alicorn.

The pegasi guards unhitched themselves as Applejack hopped off the chariot. She insisted they not worry when they asked if she wanted to put on shoes as she walked along the dirt road leading to the city hall.

"Our you certain, your Highness? We can go and purchase you two pairs from a local store in-"

"Now don' you worry 'bout me." Applejack spoke. "I was born an' raised here, so it's not like I'm suddenly unaccustom'd to walkin' barehooved." She chuckled when a few of the guards gave her sheepish looks. "I'll be fine. Yer free to do as you like for the time bein'. If any ya'll are hungry, Sugarcube Corner's a mighty nice place to grab somethin' for yer sweettooth."

Several of the guards bowed while excusing themselves and heading off to various locations within the small town. Despite her protests though, Lightweight followed her, stating it was his duty to stay beside her (and that Captain Spark Fyre would hang him by his back hooves if he found out he left Applejack to herself).

As the orange mare approached the city hall entrance, the double doors of the building opened and the mayor walked out to greet here.

"Appleja- excuse me, your Highness." She gave a bow. "I wasn't expecting you to be here. We just got a letter from Canterlot with the news a few days ago, so we haven't been given too much time to prepare for your vis-"

"Don't fret none, Mayor. I'm kina here on family business for the most part, but I reckon you'd like an explanation on my visit."

"Oh, yes...is this about your grandmother?"

Applejack quirked an eyebrow. "Granny Smith? No...I was here to talk with Apple Bloom. Why, what's the matter with Granny?"

The mayor's eyes widened before she looked down. "Oh, I...I'm sorry. I don't think it's my place to-"

"Mayor, what's wrong with her?? Is she hurt? Did she break her hip? Oh, if she went and hurt herself while I was away..."

"No, it's...not anything like that, but..." The older mare sighed. "I'd recommend making your way to see your family, Applejack."

The alicorn didn't even bother pointing out the mayor's mistake in forgetting the honorifics as she turned towards Sweet Apple Acres. "Right, thanks Mayor!"

Applejack didn't even register how fast she was galloping by the time she reached the wide expanse of Sweet Apple Acres. She slowed down as she reached the orchard, Lightweight flapping up beside her shortly after.

"Princess, are you alright?"

"Not sure if I should be or not, Lightweight." She started looking around the rows of apple trees. "Lightweight, you see a big red stallion somewhere? He's got a big ol' green apple half on his flank and is 'bout a hoof tall-" She paused before looking at herself. "half my size."

Lightweight gave a salute before flapping into the air. He took no more than several moments before flying back down and pointing towards the western field. "He's tending to some apples over that way."

The duo quickly made it towards the direction Big Mac was located, and sure enough he was bucking several large trees by himself.

"Big Mac!"

The stallion halted in place upon hearing Applejack's voice, and looked up. He squinted before his eyes became saucers. "AJ? T-that you, sis?"

Applejack gave a small nod. "Hey, Big Mac."

The stallion blinked several times before looking at himself. "Um...wow, I heard through some of the gossipin' mares in town 'bout this, but I didn't know any of it to be true..."

“Heheh, yeah, I mighta grown a little since I left for Canterlot.”

“A little? You’re twice my size now. C’mon inside, we’ll talk over some lunch. Um...” Big Mac eyed the pegasus beside her before nodding.

“Ah, sorry Mac. Lightweight, this is my older brother Big Macintosh. Big Mac, this is Lightweight.”

Lightweight gave a slight bow. “Pleasure to meet you, Lord Macintosh.”

The farm pony gave the pegasus a quizzical look. “Lord?”

“Well, you are a brother of Princess Applejack, are you not?” Lightweight smiled while Applejack gave her older brother a sheepish grin. “Therefore you’re of nobility by relation.”

Big Mac was silent for several moments before he spoke again. “Hold on...does this mean I’m suppos’d to be governin’ a town or somethin’, because I have to tend to the orchard an’-”

“Now hold on, Big Mac, you don’ have to do anything like that.” Applejack raised a hoof to calm her brother. “Shucks, Sweetie Belle’s technically a Lady of the Court, but she’s still doin’ what a filly her age should be doin’: goin’ to school and enjoyin’ her fillyhood.”

Big Mac let out a sigh of relief. “Phew, you had me worried for a second there. Heh, I’d definitely not be fit for any royal duties.”

“Heh, right...” Applejack adjusted her hat a little and felt her stomach rumble. “So, whattya say we go and make some lunch. Lightweight, I’d be happy to have you join us.”

Lightweight grinned. “It’d be my honor, Milady.”

As soon as the trio of ponies was situated in the Apple family dining room, Applejack began to tell Big Mac of what had happened since she left for Canterlot. It was a half hour later when she finally concluded her story, and Big Mac seemed to be all the more amazed with his sister.

“Well, AJ...that’s mighty impressive. So, you’re in control of the ground itself?”



"I guess...to be quite honest I haven' really felt much of a magical connection or whatever since I changed into an alicorn. Princess Celestia says it'll take time though. Lot of stuff 'bout me gettin' in sync with other girls' powers and such."

Big Mac nodded. "Well, that's impressive all the same." He looked at the clock on the wall. "Hm, Apple Bloom should be back from school soon."

The orange alicorn's eyes suddenly widened. "Apple Bloom...hey, Big Mac...I got that letter you sent, by the way."

The red stallion's smile morphed into a frown. "Ah...I was goin' to ask 'bout that..." He sighed. "So I imagine yer here to talk with Apple Bloom as well, right?"

Applejack gave a solemn nod. "I thought she was alright with me doin' this when I talked with ya'll before I left."

"She was at first...but then she started gettin' all upset 'bout you bein' gone. It started with her just bein' upset that you weren't 'round to help her with homework, then when "Bring A Family Member to School Day" came up..." He sighed. "I can help her just fine with math, but I'm no good with the social studies like you. I was going to go to her school for her project...but..."

Applejack's head drooped as she pawed the floor. "Shucks, Big Mac, I-"

Further conversation was cut off as the front door opened. "I'm home!"

A yellow filly with red hair trotted into the kitchen. She spotted the taller mare sitting at the table and frowned. "Sis?"

Applejack smiled. "Hey...Apple Bloom."

The filly looked to Big Mac and frowned. "What's *she* doin' here?"

"Apple Bloom, that's no way to go an' treat yer kin."

"Ah know, but up an' leavin' yer family ain't any better!" Apple Bloom turned towards the staircase leading up to her room. "I bet she doesn't even know about Granny bein' sick!"

“Granny Smith’s sick?” Applejack asked, her voice laced with worry while her expression became one of shock.

“Yah see? She only cares ‘bout bein’ a princess!” Apple Bloom stormed up the steps to her room.

“Apple Bloom, get back down here this-” Big Mac’s words were cut off by the slamming of Apple Bloom’s door. “Consarn that filly...” He looked back to his sister and gave her an apologetic look. “Sorry ‘bout that, sis.”

Applejack didn’t acknowledge the stallion’s apology. “How long has Granny been sick, Big Mac?”

The stallion’s gaze fell to the table. “Granny’s been sick with somethin’ fierce for ‘bout a week now. I...I didn’t want to worry you none, ‘specially since yer busy with takin’ on the duties of bein’ a princess and what have you. I was goin’ to write you another letter if you weren’t able to make it...”

“Big Mac...this is Granny we’re talkin’ ‘bout! I ain’t too busy to see my own kin when they’re sick!” She stomped a hoof on the ground to emphasize her point, causing several plates and glasses to fall out from random cupboards and shatter on the ground. She winced as she looked at the shards of broken eating ware. “Oh hayseed...guess I don’ know my own strength. Is the broom in the closet, Big Mac?”

“Eeyup.” The stallion said while looking at the mess.

Applejack was soon sweeping up the broken glasses and dishes with her mouth and hooves. Lightweight insisted on helping her, only to be met with stubborn refusals from the alicorn. As soon as she finished, Applejack sat back down at the table and sighed. “Right...tell me what’s goin’ on, Big Macintosh.”

Big Macintosh sat quietly, his thoughts apparently else where. He looked up, and frowned. “I...I don’ know how else to tell ya sis...”

“Well, just tell me. Is it the flu? The Hacks?”

“Leukoencephalomalacia...or somethin’...”

A cold lump dropped to the bottom of Applejack’s stomach. The name alone sounded bad to her ears. “Come again?”

“Nurse Redheart said it...it’s spread faster than normal. Granny...” Big Mac took a ragged breath before continuing. “...s-she musta ate somethin’ bad...I don’ know, but I told the Mayor and she’s informin’ all the ponyfolk ‘bout steerin’ clear of the corn fields for awhile...”

Applejack hardly realized that she had got up from her chair and was sitting beside her distressed brother. Usually the strong one, physically and emotionally, it was hard to watch him hold back the pain and worry in his voice.

“They can help her, can’ they?” Applejack watched as Big Mac held his head low. “Big Mac, they *can* help her, right?”

The red stallion looked up slowly, meeting his sister’s green eyes. “Sis...she’s got about a week...though it could get worse really quick. Nurse Redheart says she probably had it in her for some time before it started getting bad.”

A week or less? “N-no...” Applejack got up from her spot. “This...this is Granny Smith! She’s the oldest pony in Ponyville! She’s gotten through darn near every sickness there is an’ bounced back like it was nothin’!”

“Sis, it’s some kinda’ corn mold or somethin’, but it’s still pretty new to equine medicine. Nurse Redheart said...well, she said that it...it spreads fast an’ there aren’ many clear symptoms...” Big Mac shook his head. “G-Granny was the only one who ate any corn on the cob when we had ‘bout a week or so ago, an’...I-I’m just thankful Apple Bloom didn’ touch any of it...though...”

Applejack slumped down, and didn’t even realize the tears that began to run down her cheeks. “It ain’ fair...Granny...Granny’s looked after us since we was just foals...she can’t just...just...”

Applejack was out the door a moment later, Big Mac and Lightweight calling out to her. The pegasus guard was about to follow when Big Mac stopped him. “Hold on...” He wiped his eyes. “You’d probably be better off leavin’ her to cool down...”

Lightweight wanted to object, but this was Princess Applejack’s older brother. He knew her better than some Royal Guard did. “I suppose...” Lightweight sighed. “I...I’ve heard of this sickness...my captain said most of the guard ponies call it Corn Stroke, but I don’t think there’s any real

common name for it yet..." He was quiet for several moments before continuing. "I'm sorry that this has happened."

Big Mac just nodded. "Granny's been...rather calm 'bout the whole thing." He forced a weak smile as his throat tightened. "Then 'gain, she always told me that someday we'd be the only ones in charge of the farm and orchard when she passes away...I just...never though' much 'bout anything like this it until recently."

Lightweight grunted in understanding. "Yeah...most of us never do."

Why?

Applejack leaned against one of the older apple trees in the orchard, a Red Delicious from what she saw. The sun was beginning to set across the horizon, which snapped Applejack back to the present. It was sundown already? How much time had passed?

"Must be part of bein' magical an' such..." She sighed. Her thoughts began drifting to these topics. Magic...that was something she had no familiarity in whatsoever. Flying, well, she understood it well enough. Keep flapping and you'll eventually lift off with the proper amount of force. She planned on getting lessons from Rainbow and Fluttershy in the future, but it would have to wait. Seriously, though, how would she be able to lift off the ground with such weight on her? Celestia was already big as far as ponies went, but Applejack had both height and muscle mass over her. How could...

The sound of a whippoorwill in the distance shook the mare from her thoughts once more. The sun was now below the horizon, and Luna's waxing crescent moon was now rising into the sky and giving faint light to the peaceful apple orchard.

"Landsakes...how did I let time slip by so quickly?" The alicorn thought aloud. It felt like she had barely for more than five...minutes...

A cold feeling once again washed over her. Time. Celestia and Luna have been alive for how long? At least one thousand years? Applejack recalled Twilight telling how she had asked Celestia on several occasions about her exact age. Celestia always gave ballpark guesses that varied as much as nine thousand to fifteen thousand years.

Would the same apply to Applejack? Was she going to live for eons while still looking to be in the prime of her marehood? If that was the case...

The knot in her throat tightened. She wiped a few tears from her eyes before letting out a ragged sob. She tried to stand up, but her knees only quaked before she dropped back to the ground, crying openly without shame. After several long minutes of tears and stomping her hooves on the ground, Applejack finally managed to shakily stand up.

Immortal? Her? No, that should not be possible. She was a pony. Ponies aren't immortal, they age, grow old, and eventually die. That's the law of the world, that's the way things are.

*"You're not just a pony though, are you AJ?"* She shook her head in an attempt to rid her mind of the betraying thoughts, but to no avail.

If she was immortal, then that meant...

Her head snapped to the direction of her home. She quickly galloped towards the farmhouse at a speed that Rainbow Dash would have been proud of. Before she knew it, she was standing at the front door. She pushed it open, ignoring the salutes and calls from the surprised guard ponies that had shown up since she left the kitchen of her house several hours ago. Big Macintosh and two pegasi guards were sitting at the table, talking from the looks of things.

"Big Mac, I'm gonna talk to Granny." Applejack stated as she made her towards the main hallway.

"Sis?" Big Macintosh barely registered her statement before getting up. "Hold on, now, Granny's sleepin' and she needs-"

"I ain't arguin', Big Macintosh, I'm tellin' you, I'm gonna talk to Granny!" Applejack snapped. Big Mac actually stumbled back, and the orange mare immediately regretted her sharp tone. She let out a deep breath and spoke, much softer than before. "Look...I-I need to do this, alright? Just...let me do this one thing. I...I need to talk to her, just...just in case..."

If he wanted to argue, he didn't show it. He cast his gaze to the floor and simply nodded. "I think you might wanna talk to Apple Bloom as well. She...she came down for dinner, which you missed by the way, an' she

looked even worse than earlier. Somethin' is botherin' her, an' I could probably name the main cause in one guess..”

The mare nodded before she disappeared into the darkness of the main hall.

The floorboards creaked as she made her way to the room at the far end where Granny Smith slept. She closed her eyes, and channeled a little magic into her horn. After feeling the ‘pull’ like Twilight had told her about, she released it and felt light fill her vision. A faint glowing light emitted from her horn, giving her enough brightness to see where she was going. She pushed open the door of Granny’s room, and poked her head in. She could hear the faint snoring of the elderly mare in the bed, several blankets covering her as she slept soundly.

“Granny...?”

The matriarch of the Apple clan didn’t stir. Applejack looked to the candle sitting on her grandmother’s bedside table and managed to light it after finding some matches in a drawer. The soft candle glow seemed to create enough light to cause the older mare to stir. Her eyes blinked several times before she spoke.

“App...jack...? That...tha’ you, hun..?”

Her voice was barely a whisper, and the the alicorn just managed to hold back the tears. Even in her advanced age, Granny Smith had a rather strong voice when she wanted. Now that she took in her grandmother’s features she could see how badly this illness had affected her. She looked like she had a stroke, her muscles were slack in parts of her face, and one eye was closed. She had tiny beads of sweat around her forehead, and her breathing was a little more labored than what would be considered normal for a minor illness.

“Hiya, Granny...it’s me, Applejack.” Applejack doused the light from her horn and knelt down a little.

Granny managed to laugh weakly before coughing. There was a glass of water by her bedside, and Applejack helped her take a few sips. Her dry throat soothed, Granny spoke a little clearer. “Landsakes...look at ye’...” Both her eyes opened as she struggled to lift a shaky hoof. Applejack

sat down so that she was level with the mare while her grandmother patted her cheek softly. "So all tha' gossip in town had some truth after all..."

"Yeah...I...I'm a princess..."

Granny chuckled, a little louder this time. "Oh, don' be so modest now, Applejack. Why, I bet ye got ponies comin' from Manehattan already, tryin' to court ye."

The orange alicorn smirked before laughing as well. "Hardly. Too darn busy for tha' courtin' and frou-frou stuff."

Granny nodded slowly before closing her eyes for a few moments. "I always knew ye' were special. All grandparents tell there grandfoals that, but...I just knew..." When she opened her rust-red eyes her smile grew. "I bet Apple Bloom gave you some grief when y'stopped by, didn' she...?"

Applejack nodded.

"That filly..." She chuckled before moving on her side so she was directly facing her eldest granddaughter. "She thinks the world of you..."

"I'd beg to differ..." Applejack said with a weak smile.

"Oh, hush, you used to be mean to Big Macintosh too when you were her age. Yet whenever you had free time, it was always spent tryin' to get Big Mac to play a game with you, push you on the tire swing, or help y'with yer homework..."

The elderly pony had a far off look in her eyes for several long moments before she spoke again. "Applejack...I'm proud of you..."

Applejack nodded, the familiar knot in her throat returning with full force.

"I don' want you t'go blamin' yerself for what's happen'd to me though, alrigh'? Y'tell Big Macintosh too. You, yer brother, and sister have made this ol' mare so proud...and I can be happy knowin' that my little Applejack is goin' to be takin' care of the kingdom when I'm gone."

Applejack tried to swallow the lump in her throat, and failed miserably. She opened her mouth, and her voice came out in shaky breaths. "G-Granny...I...I wanna do a good job with bein' a ruler...but..." She

nuzzled her grandmother gently. "I'm scared, Granny. I ain't...I ain't an aristocrat, an' I don' know if I can do things right." She shook her head and let out a few shaky breaths. "I'm in charge of all the ground, rocks, and soil of Equestria. I...shoot, I can make earthquakes!" She was sobbing now. "Granny, I ain't no unicorn or pegasus, an' I don't know anythin' 'bout magic other than the little stuff that Twilight helped me with. What...what if I mess up? What if I hurt somepony when-"

"Hush..." whispered Granny Smith softly. "Yes, you ain't no aristocrat, thank Celestia. You are a smart pony though, and y'got a good heart." She weakly stroked her granddaughter's mane as she continued. "You might mess up a thing or two...but you know what?"

A snuffle. "What?"

"You got yer friends...an' if I remember right, you said they're the best friends a pony could have...am I right?" Applejack gave a single nod. "Good friends don' leave each other to fend fer themselves, either. You just make sure to be there for them, an' I promise they'll be there for you, thick 'n thin."

Applejack nuzzled the elderly mare gently. "I will, Granny. I promise..."

Granny Smith smiled gently before closing her eyes. "That's my girl...now...this ol' mare needs to rest." Applejack said nothing, just watched as her grandmother quickly drifted off to sleep once more. She quietly walked out of the room, a heavy weight in heart and her vision blurred by tears. She sniffled a bit before pausing at the foot of the steps leading up to her old room and Apple Bloom's.

*"Might as well have a word with her..."* the alicorn thought as she made her way up the steps. She stopped upon reaching the second floor and stared at the door with various drawings on it. She took several steps forward and lifted a hoof...

"Go away!" came the voice from behind the door. Applejack froze in place, a bit surprised by the sound of her younger sister's voice. She must have heard her make her way up the steps

"Apple Bloom, I just wanna talk."



“Well, I don’t!” was the reply she received. The orange mare frowned before setting her raised hoof onto the wooden floor and grumbling under her breath. Apple Bloom could be stubborn, but she never recalled Apple Bloom acting so bold towards her.

“Sis, look here now! I know that this whole situation is a bit mucked up, but ya gotta understand that I ain’t tryin’ to avoid ya’ll. Yer my family an’ I still love each of you as much as I always did.” Several seconds of silence followed before she continued. “Apple Bloom...I know yer mad at me, but...please, just...just let me have a word with ya. That’s all I ask...”

The sound of hooves walking across the room could be heard on the other side, and a latch clicked the door opened a little. Two orange eyes peeked through the crack, widening a little as they directed their gaze upward to face the alicorn.

“Can I come in?”

There was a snort from the younger filly. “Is that an order, yer Highness?”

Much to her credit, Applejack bit down a retort, instead lowering her body to face the young pony at eye level. “Apple Bloom...please...”

Apple Bloom’s annoyed expression cracked for the briefest of moments before she turned around. “I guess you can come in...”

The two sisters walked back into the filly’s room before shutting the door. Apple Bloom sat on her bed, brooding quietly while Applejack attempted to think of some way to break the silence.

“Just so you know...I...well, I’m hurt, but I’m not all that mad at you for bein’ upset with me...”

“Y-you aren’t?”

Applejack shook her head slowly. “Nope. Big Mac explained....well, everythin’ that’s happened since I left, so I guess I can understand...” She sighed heavily before giving into her mental fatigue, resting her head on the foot of her sister’s bed. “I just wish that you would’ve told me yerself.”

“I can’t. Yer in Canterlot.

Applejack rolled her eyes. "I know that, ya silly filly. You could've sent me a letter if you needed to talk to me."

Apple Bloom cast her gaze downwards, a shameful look on her face. "I thought you'd be too busy..."

"Now what made..." Applejack held her tongue before taking a deep breath and exhaling. "Apple Bloom, I...I may be a princess now, but that doesn't mean I'm too important to spend time with my little sister when she needs me. The same goes for Big Mac, and the rest of our family." She nuzzled her sister gently. "Shoot, yer the only sister I have, and Big Mac's my only brother. You, Big Mac, and Granny...yer my family."

"What about Braeburn, and Apple Fritter an-"

"They're family too, Apple Bloom. I mean...well, yer what they call immediate family. You know...closest relatives? Like moms and dads, and brothers and sisters...that's what I mean."

Apple Bloom nodded. "Yeah, I know. That's...kind of why I got upset. Ms. Cheerilee is havin' a family project for school, an' I have to interview my family and talk 'bout how they are important to me and stuff like that."

Applejack felt the slightest of smiles tug at her lips. "Big Mac said you didn' wanna interview me."

"No!" The filly blushed. "Well...y-yeah, but...I didn't mean it. I was just mad, an' he said I wasn't bein' fair to you. I guess I was bein' kinda unfair, seein' as I was makin accusations when you weren't here."

"Accusations, huh?"

"Yeah, Ms. Cheerilee taught us that word two weeks ago. It means to say somepony did somethin', usually somethin' bad."

The orange alicorn just chuckled quietly while shaking her head. "You know, Apple Bloom, if I had half the smarts you have when I was yer age, we'd probably have enough bits to repair the roof of our barn every year for the next decade."

"Huh?"

The older mare just ruffled her younger sister's mane before pulling her close. "Look, Apple Bloom, I know things are rough right now...but don't you fret none, alright? I'm gonna stay right here through it all. Granny's got us, and that's all that matters right now. I'm here for her, an' for you and Big Mac. You got that?"

"What 'bout Canterlot and-"

"Hush." Applejack placed a gentle wing over her sister without even realizing it. "Princess Celestia and Princess Luna said if me or the girls need to take care of family things, we take care of 'em. Right now, I'm worryin' 'bout my family." She sighed. "Shoot, I'm still learnin' the basics right now...me bein' gone won't be much of a problem."

"Basics? Like what?"

The blond mare smiled a bit. "Hmm...well, let's see, I got to learn a little Archaic Equinic...or whatever it's called. Celestia said it's sort've pointless, but Luna heard me use my frou-frou voice an' said it'd be nice to have some formal speakin' under my belt if I ever need it."

"Archaic Equinic?"

"Yep. It's the way most ponies spoke 'bout a thousand years ago. Really fancy stuff, sort've like the language you read in them really dusty old fairy tales and old plays by that Flankspeare pony."

"You mean Whinniam Flankspeare?"

"Yeah, that one. Never liked his plays that much. Too sappy and kissy for me."

Apple Bloom giggled. "Is it hard to speak it?"

"What, Archaic Equinic?" Applejack tapped her chin before smiling. She took a breath before clearing her throat. "Dearest Apple Bloom, wouldst thou care to let me partake in thy project for school? We would find it most pleasing to help our sister, if that is not of too much trouble."

Apple Bloom blinked. "...why are you sayin' 'we'?"

"Fancy talk. Luna says it's the proper way of sayin' 'Me and the Elements of Harmony', since being a princess means speaking for not only

yourself, but also Equestria, and the Elements of Harmony.” Applejack grinned as her sister just frowned in confusion. “Don’t worry, like I said, it’s kind of pointless nowadays. Rarity caught on to it pretty quick, which isn’t a surprise I guess.”

“Huh...” Apple Bloom’s eyes suddenly lit up. “Hey, did you say you wanna help me with my project?!”

“Sure do.”

Apple Bloom looked to her hooves before smiling. “Thanks, Applejack. You’re the best sister in the world.”

Applejack pulled the much smaller pony closer to her. She didn’t even realize it when she started shedding tears.

“Applejack? W-what’s wrong?”

“Hmm?” Applejack noticed the moisture on her cheeks and gave a weak laugh. “Sorry, Apple Bloom. I’m just...really tired. Granny Smith and the princess stuff...”

*“...and I’m immortal...”*

She shut her eyes and forced down the dark thoughts. No. For now, her family was her focus. She wanted just this one favor from the world. Let her be a pony. Just a normal pony with a family that she loved and looked after.

“Sis, are you sure you’re alright? Yer shakin’...”

Applejack looked down to her little sister and shook her head slowly. “I...guess I’m not alright...” She felt her sister scoot closer until she was lying in the crook of her neck. “I’m...scared of...” She couldn’t say it. She couldn’t...

“...scared of losing yer friends...?”

The alicorn’s breath hitched as she once again met her sister’s deep orange eyes. “Apple Bloom...”

Apple Bloom smiled. “Don’t worry Applejack. You still got yer friends, right? Yer all princesses, so you’ll never be alone in Canterlot.”

Applejack closed her eyes for a moment and exhaled deeply. Of course Apple Bloom wasn't talking about her being immortal. She was only a filly, after all...she didn't mean alone in *that* sense...

"Thanks, Apple Bloom..." She looked at the alarm clock on her sister's side table and raised an eyebrow. It was almost midnight. "You need to get to bed. You've got school in eight hours. I don' wanna be the one to explain to Cheerilee that I kept you up all night, either."

As if on cue, Apple Bloom let out a yawn. "Okay..."

Applejack tucked the filly into her bed, and made sure she was warm and comfortable before closing her door. For several long moments she stood in the hallway, her feet cemented to the floor as her gaze drifted down the hall, stopping at several photographs of family and friends.

The silence and darkness seemed keen on reflecting her mood at that moment. She let out a ragged breath, but no tears came. She had cried herself dry, it would seem.

"All of them...every single one..." She whispered to herself.

"Come on, Applejack! I'm gonna be late!"

"Hold yer horses, Apple Bloom."

Applejack adjusted her hat before tapping it onto her head and nodding to her reflection in the mirror before her. She still had the half-asleep look in her eyes, and for the first time in years she was the last of her family to wake up in the house. Even Granny Smith mustered up enough energy to have some light breakfast in her bed. Usually she was up with the dawn, seeing that she was the (former) proprietor of the numerous acres of land that made up Sweet Apple Acres.

The sound of a certain filly grumbling from downstairs could be heard, followed by the deep bass of Big Mac, no doubt telling her to be patient.

"Um...Milady?"

Applejack turned to see one of her guards standing at the doorway, a mare to be exact, looking to the floor. "Lady Apple Bloom seems rather...irked..."

Applejack chuckled. "Irked, huh?" She let her guard's words sink in. "Wait, Lady?"

The pegasus mare gave a brief nod. "Yes, Milady. She is related to royalty, so technically she holds a title of sorts."

"Best not tell her that for now. She'd probably brag 'bout it at school if you told her that."

"Yes, Milady."

Applejack and the mare made their way down the steps and into the kitchen. Several pegasus guards were eating a light meal while others stood at the entrance of the farmhouse while assuming the look of professional vigilance.

"Sis! What took you so long? We got..." She looked up at the grandfather clock near the hall before continuing. "... 'bout twenty minutes before school starts!"

While Sweet Apple Acres was technically within Ponyville's borders, it was still in the outskirts. A steady gallop into town took about ten minutes, and Ponyville Elementary was another seven minutes across town if it wasn't too busy in the morning.

Applejack flexed her wings a bit before smiling. "Don't worry, we'll make it in time."

Apple Bloom bounced towards the schoolhouse doors with an enthusiasm Pinkie Pie would have enjoyed. "Wow, I never went flyin' before! That was fun! Can we do that again sometime?"

"Heheh, sure thing, Apple Bloom."

Lightweight and two other pony guards flanking either side of the sisters halted at the doorway leading into the school. They gave Applejack an expectant look, and she simply smiled and shook her head. "Don't worry. I doubt any of the fillies or colts are gonna try an' pull a fast one on me." She chuckled a bit. "After all, they know any smart-mouthin' out of them means they get nothing during snack time."

The pegasi all shared a look before giving their princess a nod. "We'll be out here if you need us, your Highness."

Applejack gave a nod before entering the school with her sister. Apple Bloom headed straight for her desk while Applejack made her way to the desk at the front. Cheerilee was busy looking over some papers, no doubt reviewing her lesson plan for today or grading assignments. The school house was still relatively empty, which wasn't surprising. Applejack made the flight to Ponyville in less than ten minutes' time, which she considered to be a sign of improvement in her book. She still preferred solid ground under her hooves, but hearing Apple Bloom giggle and cheer as she flew a few dozen feet over Ponyville helped put her mind at ease.

That and the pegasi guards had promised they would stay close to her side if Apple Bloom should fall off her back.

"Mornin' Cheerilee."

Cheerilee kept her eyes on her papers, but gave a greeting. "Good morning, Applejack." She stopped writing, red pencil in her teeth, and looked up as her eyes widened a fraction. "Ah...App-er...your Highn-"

"Applejack will work fine with me, Cheerilee. You were a grade or two ahead of me in school if I remember right. It'd feel weird if you started gettin' all formal with me."

Cheerilee managed to keep her composure as she spoke. "Still, you're a princess! I should-"

"Today I'm just a big sister doin' a little presentation for Apple Bloom."

Cheerilee blinked. "Ah...yes, that's right. Big Macintosh was going to stop by today for Apple Bloom...I take it there have been a change of plans?"

"Yep. I'll be here in his stead." She lowered her voice. "To be honest, I'd rather him be with Granny Smith than me right now. He's better with those kinds of things..."

As she expected, Cheerilee was aware of the situation back home at Sweet Apple Acres. "I'm sorry to hear about your grandmother...Apple Bloom was so distraught during class for the past couple of days that she even skipped recess..." She cast a concerned look to the young filly. "She's a wonderful filly, Applejack...but she wouldn't talk about what was bothering

her with anyone. A foal shouldn't have to bottle up all those feelings at such an age..."

"We had a bit of a talk last night...she's a little better, all things considered." Applejack whispered.

"I'm glad. I hate seeing my students in such a state..." She smiled a little as she watched more of the colts and fillies file into the classroom, most pausing to stare at Applejack for a few moments before taking their seats. "I...I know it sounds almost cliché, but they're all like a family to me. Watching them grow up and become the ponies they'll be when they're adults...it's hard not to get attached to them."

Applejack nodded, and a thought came to mind. She stored it in the back of her mind before speaking. "Er...Cheerilee, you mind if I talk with you later on? I've been havin' a lot on my mind lately, an' I think you might be the pony I can talk to."

Cheerilee must have sensed the urgency in her voice, seeing as she nodded immediately. "Of course, Applejack."

"Thanks...um...I hope me bein' here ain't gonna throw any of yer lessons into a mess..."

Cheerilee shook her head. "Not at all...in fact, believe it or not, we were going to discuss a little about plants and how they change with the seasons. I think you'd be great as far as guest speakers go, seeing as you run a farm that relies on such things all year."

"Actually...Rainbow Dash is the one in charge of the seasons and weather..."

Cheerilee nodded. "Yes, we received an official announcement from the mayor herself about the changes in Canterlot." She smiled while looking to her students. "I..." She paused, then shook her head.

"What?"

"Nothing. I wouldn't want to cause any trouble for you six."

Applejack frowned. "Now I'm curious. Tell me what's on yer mind."



Cheerilee sighed. "If it's at all possible, would...well, would you, Fluttershy, or Rainbow Dash be willing to visit our class when I begin covering materials on the the Earth and it's weather? I...I know we're a small school, and I can understand how busy you all are so-"

"I'd like that..." Applejack paused, then added. "I should probably bring it up with the others though, and ask Princess Celestia an' Princess Luna about somethin' like that."

That could be a possible issue. If word spread that the royalty was favoring one town over others in terms of visits, it could cause some ponies to wonder how serious they were taking their duties.

"Of course. I won't make any announcements until I get word."

"Mm. Shoot, if yer hopin' for a guest lecturer, you should just get Twilight to come here. She'd be right in her element with teachin'." She looked to the clock. "Speakin' of which, I suppose I should let you get started."

Cheerilee looked to the clock and noticed it was two minutes past eight. "Ah, yes." She cleared her throat while Applejack took a seat on one side of the room. "Good morning, class."

"Good morning, Miss Cheerilee."

Applejack found her self astonished by the energy Cheerilee had. Most adult ponies would be a little intimidated by the prospect of being in charge of so many colts and fillies, but the fuschia earth pony seemed to be genuinely excited and happy to be teaching.

"As most of you can tell, we have a new *student* with us today." Cheerilee remarked in a joking tone, to which several of the young ponies replied with giggles while casting looks in Applejack's direction. "Everypony, I want you to greet our guest *and* one of the new co-rulers of Equestria, Princess Applejack."

Apparently the title of Princess wasn't that big of a shock to the students, seeing as most of them simply greeted her. "Hello, Princess Applejack!"

“Princess Applejack is, as most of you already know, Apple Bloom’s big sister. Since all of you have been doing reports on your family and letting them visit our class over the past couple of days, Apple Bloom asked her sister to stop by and spend the day talking with us about herself and what she does for Ponyville and Equestria.”

The ponies sitting before her were watching with rapt attention. She gave them a small smile as she walked to the front of the class. “Howdy. Hm...well, Miss Cheerilee mentioned that ya’ll are learnin’ ‘bout plants an’ seasons right now, that correct?”

There was a collective ‘yes’ given by the class.

“Right... well, I’m no expert on that stuff, but...” She looked to Apple Bloom as she continued. “I can tell you a little bit ‘bout how workin’ with apples is dependent on the weather an’ seasons. Now, let’s see...right after Winter Wrap-Up me an’ my older brother Big Macintosh...”

Applejack found herself enjoying a simple daisy sandwich brought to her by Lightweight from a restaurant near the school house. She and Cheerilee were currently sitting at a bench near the school yard where the fillies and colts played for recess.

“I think I can see why you like teachin’ so much.” Applejack said with a smile. “I wish I had yer patience, Cheerilee. Though that Diamond Tiara wouldn’t quit yammering to Silver Spoon right before lunch time...”

Cheerilee sighed. “Yes, I must admit that it can be hard sometimes. They’re still foals, after all. I’m just glad I don’t have to give them the ‘Birds and Bees’ talk.”

The alicorn snorted with laughter. “Aren’t you lucky?”

The two watched as a small group of ponies walked tentatively towards a guard. Cheerilee was about to call out to the group when Applejack raised a hoof. “Hold on. That’s Windswept. She’s a nice mare. Let’s just watch for now.”

Cheerilee gave a nod and watched.

“Um...miss...guard pony?”

The same mare that had spoken to Applejack earlier that morning turned to a group. She gave a smile as she looked to a young earth filly of blue color with a cutie mark that resembled a bow and arrow. "Yes?"

The filly looked down and spoke. "Um...I was just wondering...is being a Royal Guard hard?"

Lightweight gave a light laugh. "It's hard work alright. Get to run up Mount Canter- oof!"

Windswept removed her hoof from Lightweight's side before giving the young blue filly a smile. "It is hard work, but it's a job I'm proud to do."

"Do you have to fight dragons?" spoke up Snips.

Lightweight grinned. "Nope, most dragons tend to shy away from us. They're big and scary-looking, but most would rather keep to themselves."

"Well, Spike ain't like that, an' he's a dragon." commented Apple Bloom.

"True, but he's also lived with ponies his whole life if I'm informed correctly." Lightweight replied. "Hey, Stratus, didn't you see a dragon two years ago outside of Hoofington?"

A gray pegasus stallion who stood a little ways from the group looked up. "Hm? Yeah...she was probably about one hundred years old. She was heading west or something, stopped by to grab a few gems from a local diamond cutter she heard about."

"No kidding? What'd she pay with?"

"Would you believe platinum armor?"

Cheerilee decided to jump in. "Platinum armor? Platinum hasn't been cycled through Equestrian bartering systems in over two hundred years...we simply stopped making platinum products after the last conflict with the Griffin Tribes in the north..."

"I know. The jeweler said he couldn't give her enough change in exchange, so she simply let him keep it." Stratus grinned. "They say she also gave the jeweler one of her magical scales."

“What kind of magic?” Snips inquired.

“Don’t know. Never found out.”

The fillies and colts let out a collective groan, then the blue filly from earlier spoke up. “Someday, I’m going to be a Royal Guardspony!”

Windswept beamed. “Is that so? Well good for you!” She looked over to Applejack and laughed. “Your Highness, we have a hopeful recruit over here for you.”

Applejack forced out a laugh. “That so? Well, that’s mighty nice to hear.”

*“I wonder if I’ll remember that filly by the time she’s old enough join the Royal Guard.”* was what she was actually thinking.

The rest of recess was spent with the fillies and colts running around and playing as ponies do at such an age while Lightweight, Stratus, and Windswept continued their watch. After the recess was over Cheerilee spent another hour on math with the ponies before the final bell tolled. Applejack stayed in the school while the rest of the fillies and colts, Apple Bloom excluded, said their goodbyes to the alicorn before leaving.

“Just to let you know, the afternoon class is smaller. Though you’ll likely recognize a few of the students.” Cheerilee began as she erased the board. “Apple Bloom will probably know a few of them too.”

“Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle, right?” Apple Bloom asked with a knowing grin.

Cheerilee gave a nod. “I must say, I can’t remember the last time I had a student stay after school for another class.”

“Yeah, sometimes I wish I had the afternoon class, but if I did then I couldn’t hang out with Twist.”

“Well...” Cheerilee began. “From what I heard, Twist’s parents were going to start having her go to the later class period next year.”

“Really?” Apple Bloom looked to her sister pleadingly. “Hey, sis, can I go to the later class next year instead of the mornin’ one?”

“Hmm...” Applejack thought for a moment. “I don’t think that’d be a problem...but you’ll have to promise to help Big Mac ‘round the farm in the mornin’ then, as well as make sure to do all yer homework.”

“I will, I promise.”

Soon the ponies of the afternoon session piled into the classroom (Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo both cheered before running to embrace Apple Bloom in a group hug) and two pegasus stallions could be seen drawing a chariot to the side of the schoolhouse. Likely the two that were overseeing Sweetie Belle’s transportation from Canterlot. With Rarity’s and her parents on their year-long cruise through the Sea Pony and Serpent Oceans, the two sisters really had no other option. Applejack could only guess that Sweetie Belle loved the chariot rides.

“Good afternoon, class!” Cheerilee began, speaking a bit louder over the chatter of the classroom. “Now, as most of you have already noticed, we have a very special guest here today.” Cheerilee looked to Apple Bloom. “Would you care to introduce her, Apple Bloom?”

“Sure!” Apple Bloom happily trotted up to the front of the classroom and grinned. “Today I invited my big sister Applejack! She’s the best apple farmer in all of Equestria, and is also a princess!”

There was a general murmur of excitement and interest from the class, aside from Sweetie Belle, who simply sat in her desk and listened intently.

Applejack repeated the same routine as before, talking about the importance of the change of seasons while answering any questions directed to her from the class. Sweetie Belle asked one question in particular that caught her by surprise.

“Do you ever...talk to the Element of Honesty?”

Applejack blinked, and she noted that several pegasus guards peeked into the classroom from outside. “Well now...that’s an interestin’ question.” She hummed in thought before shaking her head. “No, I don’t rightfully claim to have ever spoken to the Element of Honesty, or any of the others for that matter.”

Cheerilee didn't miss a beat. "Now, if most of you remember, the Elements of Harmony are responsible for bringing Princess Luna back to us and for giving harmony to the land of Equestria." She gave Applejack a small nod before continuing. "Can anyone tell me the other five?"

"Magic!" shouted a filly once she was called on.

"Yes, Magic is definitely one of the Elements. Yes, Sweetie Belle?"

"Generosity! My sister Rarity is the Princess of Generosity, too!"

"That's right. How about...Princess Rainbow Dash. Can anyone tell me what Element she's in charge of?"

Applejack watched in amazement as the colts and fillies before her fired off answers to questions she herself didn't know until a little more than a year ago relating to the magical jeweled artifacts. An hour later when she had finished her impromptu presentation on farming it was time for arts and crafts. While Apple Bloom joined Sweetie Belle and Scootaloo, Applejack watched with Cheerilee.

"Sorry for stealing your thunder earlier..." Cheerilee began as she graded some papers from her desk. "I noticed the surprised look on your face, so I wanted to keep the students from overwhelming you."

"Huh? Oh, no, thank you for helpin' me back there...though...how did you know all that stuff?"

Cheerilee smiled. "About three months ago Canterlot sent out textbooks for teachers on subjects relating to the Elements of Harmony. Apparently when Princess Luna returned she thought it a good idea to have the general populous educated on the basic history of the Elements."

Applejack didn't know what was more impressive, the casual tone Cheerilee used to explain such things like the Elements of Harmony, or the fact that she was able to talk so clearly with a red pencil in her mouth.

"As for the information relating to you six being princesses, the mayor gave me a little bit of public information to add on the topic from the letters sent throughout Equestria relating to all of you becoming our new rulers." She chuckled a bit before looking towards Sweetie Belle. "One unicorn filly in particular is our 'expert' on those things."

The two mares chatted quietly for about another hour before Cheerilee let her students go out for recess. This time Applejack took part in the fun, chasing the ponies around the schoolyard in a game of tag. Afterwards Cheerilee called the class back inside for math. The final hour of school came and went quickly for Applejack, and before she knew it she was giving Sweetie Belle a hug goodbye.

“Oh, hold on a sec’ Sweetie Belle. Here,” She gave the filly a sealed envelope. “Give this to yer sister. It’s...well, it’ll explain what the situation is with me an’ my family.”

The young unicorn caught onto the tone in the blond mare’s voice. “Is something wrong?”

“Well...” She didn’t want to lie, and keeping her in the dark wouldn’t be the best of ideas, considering the circumstances...and Apple Bloom would need her friends’ comfort more than ever when that time came. “Scootaloo...can you come over here too, Sugarcube?”

“Sure, Applejack.” The pegasus filly walked over.

She looked to Apple Bloom, who was engaged in conversation with Windswept. “You girls should probably know this. Granny Smith...well...” She bit her lower lip, trying to find the right words. “...she’s not doin’ too well right now. She’s sick.”

Sweetie Belle gasped. “Oh no, how bad is it?”

“Is it the hay fever? The trots?” Scootaloo added.

Applejack shook her head slowly. “No, I wish it were just that. It’s...worse. She’s got somethin’ called Leukoencephalomalacia. It’s a very bad disease, an’ there ain’t no cure.”

“S-so...she’s gonna have to deal with it for the rest of her life?” Sweetie Belle asked tentatively.

Again, Applejack shook her head. “No, it’s...worse than that, girls. She...well...the illness is at its worst stage, an’ I...don’ think she has much longer.”

Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle both went quiet. For several long moments they stood there, trying to process what Applejack had just told

them. "S-so...Granny Smith is...gonna...?" Scootaloo shook her head. "N-no...she can't..."

"I'm sorry, Scootaloo, but...it's incurable. No magic can fix it, and there ain't no known cure for it."

Sweetie Belle let a few tears run down her cheeks. "W-why didn't Apple Bloom tell us?"

"My guess is that she didn't want you girls to fret none 'bout it." The alicorn looked to her sister and sighed. "A little foolish, really, but...part of me knows I'd probably do the same thing."

Apple Bloom and Windswept made their way towards the others, and the young Apple filly was caught off guard when her friends both wrapped their hooves around her in a hug.

"G-girls, what-?"

"We're sorry about your grandma." Scootaloo said quietly. "Applejack...she told us."

Apple Bloom looked to her older sister, who simply nodded.

The young filly blinked several times while fighting off tears of her own. "It's...it's going to be okay-"

"You shouldn't keep things like this to yourself, Apple Bloom." Sweetie Belle said with a sniffle. "Granny Smith is like a grandma to us too."

"W-well...I didn'..."

"You're like family to us, Apple Bloom." Scootaloo added.

With that, the flood gates opened. Apple Bloom cried quietly in her friends' embrace. "I-I'm sorry! I was...I didn't want you to worry 'bout all of that! I-I mean, Sweetie Belle's got her sister in Canterlot, and Scootaloo, you've got yer tricks to work on an'-"

"You're our friend, Apple Bloom. We care about you, too." Sweetie Belle said.



Applejack watched with a mixture of sadness and relief as her sister let the tears out. No doubt she was still hurting badly from all that was happening. She smiled and laughed in school, sure, but Applejack could see that under the surface, the filly was still broken from all the pain she had been dealing with lately.

“Milady...?”

A featherlight touch brushed against the alicorn's side. She looked down to see Windswept offering her a sympathetic smile. “O-oh, s-sorry ‘bout that, Sugarcube. What’s wrong?”

Windswept just frowned a little. “Milady...if I may offer some advice from Princess Celestia’s book of wisdom?”

Applejack nodded.

“Her Highness has said it time and time again, “Every pony feels. Alicorns are no exception.” If...if you need a shoulder to lean on...we’re here.”

The former farm pony smiled gratefully. “Thanks much, Windswept. I...I’ll be alright’ for now, though.”

Windswept gave a low bow. “Very well. Lightweight, Stratus, and myself will be waiting near Lady Sweetie Belle’s chariot for you and Lady Apple Bloom, then.”

Applejack watched the guard pony head back to talk with her peers, a small smile playing at the corners of her lips. For ponies who were supposedly the most disciplined in all of Equestria, they sure had compassion. No doubt in part because of Celestia.

“Applejack?”

The blond alicorn looked over her shoulder to see Cheerilee approaching her hesitantly, taking note of her distraught students. “I-is everything alright?”

Applejack gave a slight nod. “I told the girls about Granny. Scootaloo and Sweetie Belle are Apple Bloom’s friends an’ I figured they have a right to know. I mean...” She glanced over to the trio of fillies, who were now quietly holding each other. “Those two are practically kin to me as well.”

Cheerilee nodded. "I know the feeling all too well."

Applejack suddenly remembered her conversation with the teacher earlier today. "Oh, Cheerilee, I...you remember that question I had for you?"

"Yes, what did you want to ask me?"

"I was...just wonderin'...how do you deal with watchin' yer students grow up right in front of yer eyes...how...how does it make you feel to watch time pass so quickly?"

"Ah." Cheerilee put on a thoughtful expression before a smile slowly crept onto her face. "I suppose I try to remember the fun I had with my students when they were just little colts and fillies. I haven't been teaching for very long compared to other ponies in Equestria...but these past few years have been wonderful. I've watched some ponies leave town that I truly cared for as students. I know I may never see some of them ever again..." She shook her head. "Some ponies may think a teacher caring so deeply for school age ponies to be cliché, but...I take great pride in what I do. Therefore, I value every moment I have with my students. I try to teach them everything I can to prepare them for the big, open world out there." She made a gesture with her hoof towards the hills beyond Ponyville. "The truth is, Applejack, even now I think about such things. The day will come when I will no longer be teaching your sister, or any of my other current students. They'll grow older...they'll move on to bigger things and learn more."

"Aren't...aren't you scared of what will happen to them when they get older?"

"Sometimes, but I think part of being a teacher involves being able to trust your students' judgement and let them make their own choices. If I continue to hold their hooves, they'll never be able to reach their full potential."

Perhaps it was the way Cheerilee said it, or the sympathetic, knowing look in her eyes that said, "*I understand what you're trying to ask me.*", but Applejack found herself nodding.

"Thanks, Cheerilee...I may be a princess, but...I still consider you the smarter pony."

“Well, someday when I become old and senile I hope you keep those words in mind.” She laughed. “It can’t hurt to boost an old mare’s ego, can it?”

“No, heheh, I suppose not.” Applejack managed to grin a little before walking over to the three fillies. She gently nudged her sister, who looked up, clearly surprised and shaken from her thoughts. “Hey, ready to head home?”

Apple Bloom nodded. “Yeah...”

Scotaloo and Sweetie Belle gave a final farewell to the red-maned filly before going their separate ways, Sweetie Belle taking the chariot while Scotaloo headed into town. Applejack offered to give Apple Bloom a lift on her back, but the filly declined, stating she felt like walking.

So they did just that...

The walk was rather quiet for the most part, neither of them feeling much like talking. Lightweight, Stratus, and Windswept flew overhead at a discrete distance to provide the two sisters adequate privacy, which Applejack couldn’t be more thankful for at the moment.

“Hey...Applejack...?”

A sensation cascaded down Applejack’s neck, like tiny pinpricks on skin. She shook it off and smiled. “Yes?”

“So...there’s *no* magic in all of Equestria to help Granny Smith?”

Darn, should’ve listened to the feeling. “No, from what I understand, there isn’t. No medicine, an’ no magic either.”

“Even...even Princess Celestia or Princess Luna can’t help Granny Smith?”

“I’m ‘fraid not, Apple Bloom. I talked to the guards and they more or less said that magic don’ fix illness, even an alicorn’s magic.”

“B-but...it’s not fair! She’s the best grandma in all of Equestria an’-”

“I know, believe me, I’ve been thinkin’ the same thing. That’s...just the way things work. Ponies don’ live for ever. Nothing does. Not even

dragons. Sometimes it's sickness, or an accident that hurts somepony, but in the end, we all have to pass on."

She found it odd to be talking about such a grim subject with the filly. Apple Bloom had always been advanced for her age in terms of thought, but this was something even Applejack avoided talking about. Most ponies did, actually. Death was like a weed in a garden: it was a part of the surroundings, but it was typically treated with distaste and most tried to ignore it. Removing it from the picture was a temporary solution, but it would only return later in a different manner or appearance, and cause problems for the rest of the plants.

It was an inevitability.

"What...what 'bout you?"

Applejack almost tripped. "What 'bout me?"

"Well, yer an alicorn. So is Princess Luna an' Celestia...an'...they've been 'round for a thousand years or more, right? Neither of them look that old. I mean...Granny Smith's not even eighty years old and look at *her* compared to *them*!"

Again, Apple Bloom was advanced for her age.

"I don' think I have an answer for that at the moment, Apple Bloom. I need to talk to Luna and Celestia 'bout that..." She gave what she hoped was a comforting smile as she gazed into her sister's inquisitive, worried eyes. "Whatever the case may be though, it ain't gonna change anything between us. Yer my sister, an' if somepony has a problem with it, they'll have to speak to me 'bout it."

The filly seemed to accept the answer for what it was and remained quiet for the rest of the walk back to Sweet Apple Acres, much to Applejack's relief. The three pegasi landed behind the sisters and flanked their left and right sides as they made their way up the road to the farmhouse.

"Hey, Stratus, am I seeing things or are those the Honor Guard of Princess Luna up ahead?"

About twenty ponies in a dark blue armor could be seen standing around near the farmhouse. They noticed Applejack and the others and bowed low upon her nearing the home. One of the more decorated guards spoke. "Your Highness, we apologize for the unannounced visit. Her Highness wished to come by as soon as she got word of your grandmother's condition from Lady Sweetie Belle."

Applejack blinked. "That was almost an hour ago. Sure, we took our sweet time gettin' back home an' all, but still..."

The unicorn coughed. "Well, Lady Sweetie Belle took a chariot, and the average trip from Ponyville to Canterlot is less than twenty minutes if one keeps a brisk pace. We arrived here via mass teleportation spell about ten minutes ago."

Applejack frowned. "Well, that's thoughtful an' all of Luna, but...we don't have room for all of you to-"

"Don't worry, Applejack, we won't be here for too long."

Applejack looked to the front porch of her home to see Luna standing there, her dark blue coat and blue mane reflecting the late afternoon sunlight like water.

The orange alicorn nodded. "Well, I'm guessing you're caught up on everythin' then, huh?"

"Indeed." She sighed while making her way towards her peer, giving a small bow of respect, which Applejack returned. "I spoke briefly with your grandmother. She truly is a pony who has lived her years well. I must admit, I'm envious of your family, Applejack. Celestia is a wonderful sister, don't misunderstand me, but...if my knowledge of the Apple family is correct, you have relatives from every corner of the country."

"Heh, it's as they say: Where there's apple trees, there's sure to be Apples." Applejack glanced down to see her sister gazing at the blue alicorn in a mild daze. "Apple Bloom, you remember Princess Luna, don't you?"

Apple Bloom smiled before stepping forward. "Hello, Princess Luna. I'm Apple Bloom." She gave the best bow she could. "Pleased to meet you."

Luna smiled in mild amusement. "The pleasure is mine, I assure you." She sat down before continuing, her voice softer this time. "You have a wonderful family, Apple Bloom. Your grandmother is one of the wisest ponies I've spoken to in ages."

Apple Bloom scratched at the ground with a hoof. "Is it true that you can' make her better?"

Luna bowed her head, her mane shadowing her eyes slightly. "I'm sorry, dear Apple Bloom. This illness...I'm not familiar with it myself, and from what Twilight Sparkle has heard of it, Equestria's finest pathologists are still trying to find a cure for it."

"What 'bout magic? Can' you just make it...vanish?"

"Apple Bloom, I already-"

Luna raised gently raised a hoof, interrupting Applejack as politely as she could. "It's alright, Applejack. If...if you do not mind too much, I would like to have a talk with your sister."

The orange alicorn looked to Apple Bloom, then nodded and made her way inside the house. Luna turned back to the young filly and smiled gently. "Magic isn't a cure-all, Apple Bloom. It follows certain principles and rules, and unfortunately afflictions to the body are something that ponies cannot remove with magic."

"B-but I've seen Twilight do all sorts of amazin' things with magic! She turned a rock into a hat once, an' she told me that she even turned her parents into plants by accident when she was a filly!"

"Did she now? I'll have to ask her about that some day." Luna laughed quietly. "That was most likely transformation magic. Spells like those, while amazing, are only temporary spells."

Apple Bloom's head drooped. "But...you're a princess! You can do anything, can't you? You and Celestia move the Moon and Sun!"

"Yes, but even we have limits." She nuzzled the distraught filly. "I cannot get rid of the common cold or flu. Even alicorns can get sick...to an extent." The last part was spoken in a hushed tone.

"R-really?"

“Yes. Why, a few months ago I had a minor fever. It wasn’t pleasant at all, but I got through it in the end...”

The filly felt tears welling up in her eyes yet again. “So...Granny Smith is just going to die...?”

“She won’t leave you, though.” Apple Bloom gave the alicorn a confused look. “You see, Apple Bloom, the wonderful thing about ponies is that they continue to live on, even after death. You know how?”

Apple Bloom shook her head.

“Right here...” She tapped Apple Bloom’s head gently. “...and right here.” She placed her hoof gently over Apple Bloom’s chest. “We keep their memories alive, and that’s how they live on. So as long as *you* remember the good times you’ve shared with that pony, *they* shall never leave you.”

“You really think so?”

“That’s what my sister told me when I was younger. I believe there’s a lot of truth to it. Remembering a pony and keeping the values they taught close to your heart allows those we care for throughout our lives to exist even after death.” She covered Apple Bloom with a blue wing. “She may leave you in body, Apple Bloom, but as long as you remember what she taught you and cherish the times you had with her, she’ll still be with you.”

The sound of a door opening from the farmhouse could be heard. “Apple Bloom?”

The filly in question looked up to see her brother. His eyes were puffy and it looked like he had been crying. “Big Mac?”

“I think...you better come inside with me. Granny Smith is...well, she’s gotten worse...”

Apple Bloom’s eyes widened. “Wh-whattya mean?”

“She’s...well, she’s not awake anymore...she’s in what they call a coma. She...probably won’ make it through the night. I...I figured it’d be best for us t’say our goodbyes.”

“N-no...you can’ be serious!”

Big Mac walked over to his now sobbing sister. He pulled her gently into a hug while giving the Princess of the Night a nod. "C'mon, Apple Bloom."

The Apple siblings walked inside, the door closing with a rattle behind them. The midnight alicorn exhaled deeply, her eyes now shadowed by her mane. Luna expected Celestia and she would need to have a long talk with Applejack and the others after this was over. While she had seen more ponies than she would like to remember age and pass on before her very eyes, the experience always affected her deeply. Both of the ancient sisters had learned to control their emotions over the centuries of ruling Equestria, but every now and then Luna or Celestia had to find some way to release their pent up feelings. Celestia sometimes ate unhealthy levels of ice cream, or flung paint at a canvas to 'reflect her inner self's pain' or so she put it. Luna would lock herself up in her room and play whatever instrument she had lying around, or stomped in a feathered pillow she had in her room.

She only hoped the others would find ways to keep themselves from breaking down.

Applejack, Apple Bloom, and Big Macintosh stood on one side of the bed by their grandmother, silently watching as she breathed. While she was unresponsive, her body still managed to keep her breathing and alive, if not barely.

"Granny...it's us." Applejack began. "We wanted to make sure we got to...say goodbye. It ain't right for an Apple to not say goodbye, after all."

The three were silent again, the occasional snuffle from Apple Bloom being the only thing cutting through the silence. Big Mac had a hoof placed gently over her as he and his sister attempted to comfort her as best as they could.

"We're...we're all a little scared, Granny, but..." Applejack let out a weak, ragged breath. "We'll pull through, somehow. We'll keep doin' our jobs...an'...an' I'll take good care of Equestria. I promise."

"I'll keep studyin' hard, and help Big Mac 'round the farm." Apple Bloom added quietly.



“I’ll look after Apple Bloom an’ the farm.” Big Mac spoke, his voice just above a whisper. “I’ll do my best, Granny.”

Eventually Apple Bloom was escorted out after giving a final goodbye, and now only Applejack remained in the room. She looked to the door, then to her grandmother. She gently placed her horn beside her grandmother’s forehead, and closed her eyes tightly. The horn sparked to life, bathing the room in a soft, orange glow. She opened one eye, only to close it again. The light intensified a bit more, and tears began to fall from the alicorn’s eyes. She opened them again, and began to sob as she watched her dying grandmother continue to lie in her bed, unmoving.

The glow became so intense that one would have expected it to be morning from the brightness of the room. Her horn suddenly fizzled out as Applejack collapsed in a silent heap, tears pouring down her cheeks. “I-I’m sorry, Granny...I...I tried...”

Meanwhile, Big Mac stood just outside the room, watching between the partially open door as his sister wept. He hung his head and cried silently before walking back to Apple Bloom’s room.

He would have told Applejack to stop, but...in a way it was probably closure for the headstrong mare. He wouldn’t begrudge her of that.

The following morning Apple Bloom didn’t go to school. In fact, almost all of Ponyville took a day off from normal activities.

Granny Smith had asked to be cremated, and her remains be spread across Sweet Apple Acres after the harvest. Partly because she had put so much of her life into building up the orchard into what it is today, and partly because she didn’t want her remains to land on any of the apples that would be sold to pony folk. That wouldn’t help for business, or so her will had stated.

The two sisters and one brother had placed her remains in a marble urn for the time being, and simply spent the better part of the morning greeting ponies who visited them at their grandmother’s wake. Twilight, Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, Pinkie, Rarity, Luna, and Celestia all paid the Apple family a visit throughout the day at different times, offering what comfort they could.

Naturally, Granny Smith left all her belongings in the care of her grandchildren, though she stated that Sweet Apple Acres could be passed down to any capable Apple family member who was able run both the labor and finances of the vast estate. This left the three Apple members of Ponyville in a rather tough spot.

Big Mac was a great worker, but he simply lacked the experience of working in the financial field. He could crunch numbers, but he wouldn't be able to focus as much time on finances while also tending to the farm throughout the year. He simply had too much on his plate, so to speak.

Apple Bloom was simply too young. She lacked the muscular strength to buck as well as her brother and sister. She was also still attending school. Suffice to say, she wasn't quite ready to run the farm.

Applejack was a princess now, and couldn't spend her time focusing on the farm and orchard. Doing so would get in the way of her duties, which she was already taking time off from.

As such, there was only one thing left to do: call out to the Apple family for help. Letters were sent to all parts of Equestria to every member that Applejack and Big Mac could think of. Even a few of the Oranges were mailed letters.

"Do you reckon any of 'em can move out here?"

Big Mac and Applejack were currently sitting and looking out to the vast fields of Sweet Apple Acres. It was somewhere around two in the afternoon, but they both felt drained. Apple Bloom had went to her room where she cried herself to sleep, so now it was just the two of them.

"I don' know, sis, but I know that Apples don' leave each other hangin'."

Applejack grunted in agreement. "If anythin', I'm sure Braeburn would be willin' to move on over to Ponyville. He's still livin' on his own, an' technically the town of Appleloosa owns the orchard, not him. I heard Apple Fritter's been tryin' to find business in Hoofington, but she's been havin' little luck. Maybe she'd like to move in with us..."

The two were silent after that. Big Mac was currently chewing on a piece of long grass, a habit indicating his mind was likely elsewhere.

“Then again, maybe Red Delicious or Golden Delicious can move over here instead. They’re only a few days away in Flank Valley. No...wait, they’re busy with startin’ up they’re family’s grocery store...”

“Sis...”

“Maybe Apple Bumpkin can come here...though she’s out in Fillydelphia, an’...wait, she’s got her bakery to worry ‘bout...”

“Sis.”

“Well, shoot...this ain’t good at all. Perhaps gettin’ Apple Brioche over here from Coltsburgh is-”

“Sis!”

Applejack jumped a little at the sound of Big Mac’s voice. “H-huh? Oh, sorry, what were you sayin’?”

Big Mac shook his head. “I was goin’ to tell you not too worry. Caramel still works with us, an’ I’m sure the Harvest family down the road can lend us a hoof if we are in a real pickle this year. I also know for a fact that Princess Luna told me somethin’ ‘bout gettin’ extra help next season if we really need it.”

The alicorn blinked several times before looking down. “I know.”

“The point is that all that is in the future. What we should focus on right now is the present.” He gave her a gentle nudge with a hoof. “Granny Smith always said you tend to get worked up easy.”

Big Mac wasn’t much of a socialite or talker. As such, when he spoke, ponies tended to listen. “Thanks, Big Mac.”

“Eeyup. Anytime.” He continued chewing on his grass, his gaze once again looking out towards the apple trees. “Granny left us with all of this. This isn’t just ours, though. This is Ponyville’s, and the Apple family’s. It ain’t gonna vanish just like that, sis.”

Surprisingly enough, Applejack felt a little less stressed upon hearing her brother’s words. “Right...sorry ‘bout that.”

"No worries. You just promise to keep bein' the pony that you are, an' everythin' will turn out fine."

"I'm lucky to have a brother like you, you know that?"

Big Mac smirked ever so slightly. "Eeyup."

"Now you be sure to write to me as soon as you get word back from any family, alrigh'?"

"Eeyup."

"If you need anything, an' I mean anything, be sure to let me know."

"Eeyup."

Applejack frowned. "Big Mac, I mean it."

The stallion just smiled. "So do I."

The alicorn sighed before looking to her younger sibling. "Take care of Big Mac for me. Make sure he doesn' go an' burn dinner every night."

"I'll try. He ain't that bad of a cook, Applejack."

"Well, all the same." The orange alicorn leaned down and nuzzled her sister and brother. "I'll send you a letter if I find out anythin' 'bout work for the next season, alrigh'? Just take care of yourselves, an' I'll be sure to visit durin' the holidays."

"Actually..." Big Mac began. "*Somepony* was hopin' we could maybe come to Canterlot." He directed his gaze to Apple Bloom, and smiled when Applejack caught on.

"Well, I dunno. It's a pretty big castle, and I hate to have either of you get lost when-"

"Sis!"

Applejack chuckled before ruffling her sister's hair. "I'm only teasin'. Now remember, you write to me whenever you wanna talk."

"Sis, I don' wanna make you too busy though-"

Applejack placed a hoof over the filly's mouth. "I ain't gonna argue. I'm yer big sister. That's what big sister's do."

Apple Bloom smiled in defeat. "Alright."

Applejack made her way towards the chariot where her guards waited. "Keep in touch. Promise?"

"Eeyup."

Apple Bloom grinned. "I will! I Pinkie-Promise!"

"Fair enough. I'll be sure to tell Pinkie you said that. She'll hold you to it, y'know."

Applejack stepped into her chariot and gave the guards a nod. The pegasi made their way down the road, flapping their wings as they slowly got the chariot off the ground.

"Bye, Applejack!" Apple Bloom called out as she raced down the road, Big Mac trailing behind. "Take good care of Equestria, okay?!"

Applejack looked down to the two as she moved further and further away. She waved at them and felt herself tearing up.

*"I will, Apple Bloom...I'll do it for you, Big Mac...Granny Smith...for everypony."*

While she knew she had a long and likely difficult road ahead of her, Applejack no longer felt as intimidated by it. She saw it merely as a part of who she was, and what was expected of her. She was a princess of Equestria, and the overseer of the earth and all its resources. She would insure that orchards like Sweet Apple Acres would continue to be healthy and hardy for ages to come, as well as all the other farms and gardens in Equestria.

Granny Smith would have liked that.